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TARGET SAIGON 1973-75

Volume 2: The Fall of South Vietnam: The Beginning of the End January 1974–March 1975

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We always welcome receiving book proposals from prospective authors.

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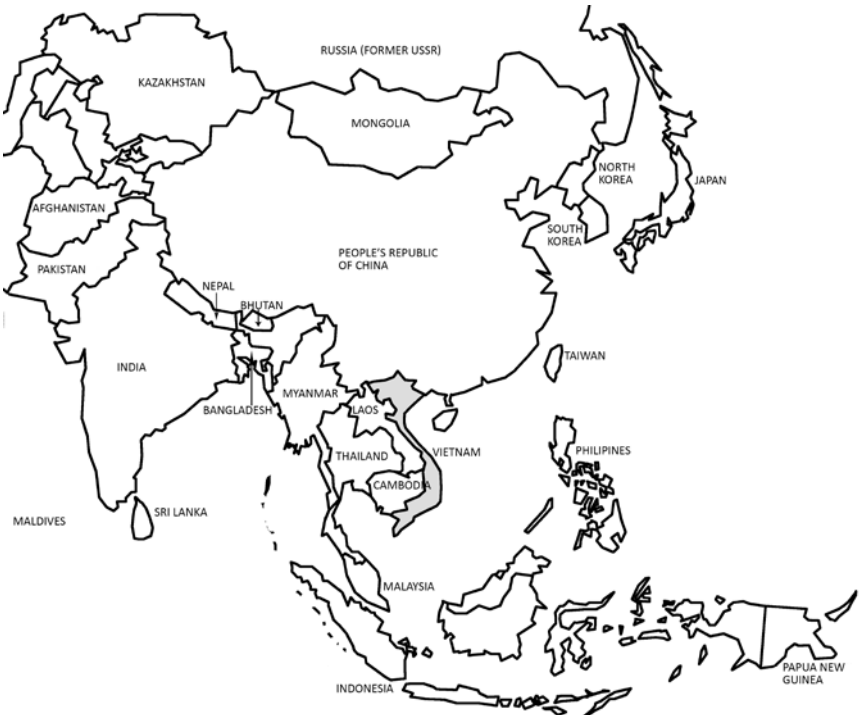

Note: In order to simplify the use of this book, all names, locations and geographic designations are as provided in *The Times World Atlas*, or other traditionally accepted major sources of reference, as of the time of described events.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my late parents who passionately loved the Central Highlands of Vietnam, its cloud-covered mountains, the undulating hills, the coffee plantations and its proud Montagnard tribes.

ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Anti-Aircraft
AAA	Anti-Aircraft Artillery
ACS	Armoured Cavalry Squadron
AFB	Air Force Base
APC	Armoured Personnel Carrier
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam, the South Vietnamese Army
ATGM	Anti-Tank Guided Missile
CBU	Cluster Bomb Unit
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (USA)
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CMC	Central Military Commission, of the Politburo
CO	Commanding Officer
COSVN	Central Office for South Vietnam
DAO	Defence Attaché Office
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone, separating North from South Vietnam
FAC	Forward Air Controller, usually airborne controller in observation aircraft
FSB	Fire Support Base
GP	General-Purpose (bomb)
HQ	Headquarters
KIA	Killed in Action
Km	Kilometre
LST	Landing Ship Tank
MANPADS	Man-Portable Air Defence System(s) – light surface-to-air missile system that can be carried and deployed in combat by a single soldier
MBT	Main Battle Tank
MIA	Missing in Action
MR	Military Region
MRL	Multiple Rocket Launcher
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam, the North Vietnamese Army
PLANAF	People's Liberation Army Navy Air Force
POW	Prisoner of War
PRG	Provisional Revolutionary Government (Viet Cong)
RF/PF	Regional Forces/People's Forces from the ARVN
SA-2 Guideline	ASCC codename for S-75 Dvina, Soviet SAM system
SA-7 Grail	ASCC codename for 9K32 Strela-2, Soviet MANPADS
SAC	Strategic Army Corps
SAM	Surface-to-Air Missile
SP	Self-Propelled (artillery)
UHF	Ultra High Frequency
USMC	United States Marine Corps
USAF	United States Air Force
USN	United States Navy
VNAF	Vietnamese Air Force, Air Force of South Vietnam
VNN	Vietnamese Navy, Navy of South Vietnam
VNMC	Vietnamese Marine Corps
WIA	Wounded in Action

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1
FIGHTING A POOR MAN'S WAR

On 27 January 1973, peace was finally signed in Paris, creating hopes that the fighting in Vietnam would stop. In exchange for the return of prisoners of war, the United States would withdraw its last forces while the North Vietnamese could maintain their forces in the areas they controlled in South Vietnam. One year after the so-called 'Peace Accords', the dreams of fighting having ceased were more remote than ever. Since the departure of US forces, the South Vietnamese had prevailed against their foe throughout 1973, with combat escalating from skirmishes to divisional levels (see *Target Saigon* Volume 1), but at a high cost, while the political roadmap envisaged by the agreements

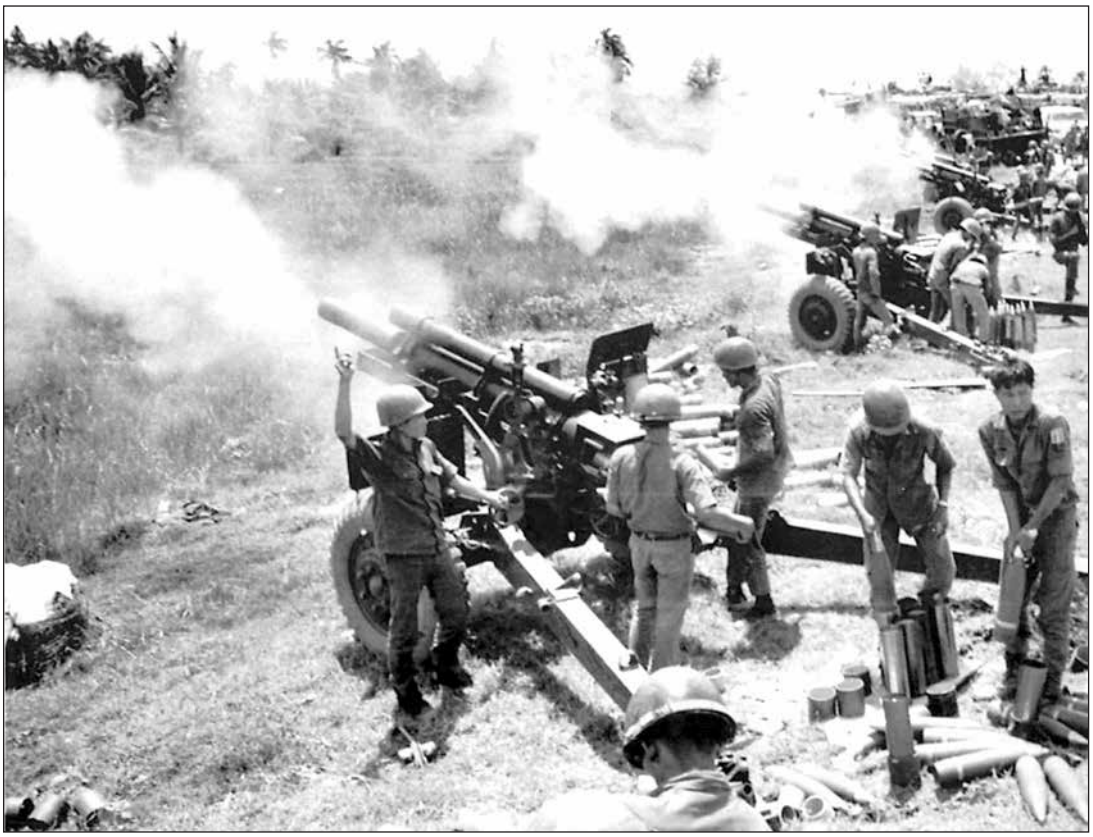
was at a dead end. The economic situation had also worsened for the Saigon government of President Nguyen Van Thieu, which desperately believed in the promises made by Washington that economic and military aid would continue to be provided. But, embroiled in the 'Watergate Scandal', President Richard Nixon – the strongest supporter of South Vietnam – could not counterbalance a hostile Congress. Already, less than six months after the American departure, US military aid had been reduced and the protocol of replacing equipment lost on a one-for-one basis could not be fulfilled.

With the massive American aid reduction, President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam was in a quandary over his strategic stance by mid-1974. Despite some of his advisers suggesting a redeployment of their forces to more defensible positions, he stubbornly clung to his strategy to not cede territory to the enemy. Consequently, no serious planning for an orderly withdrawal was done. His change of mind under duress in the spring of 1975 would lead to a catastrophe. (US Army)

Initially, the commander of the Defence Attaché Office (DAO), the organisation in charge of funnelling that aid, Major General John E. Murray, wanted to warn the South Vietnamese of the impending cutbacks, but was told not to do that for fear of causing a slump in their morale. What had been only an internal US Army stock management issue, partly because they had been sucked dry by urgently furnishing Israel during the Yom Kippur War, became a public problem when Congress officially questioned the validity of continuing to support a perceived oppressive regime. Furthermore, Congress reasoned that reducing the aid would force Saigon to lower the level of combat accordingly, providing more encouragement for a true ceasefire environment to develop. They naively put the blame solely on the Thieu government, suggesting that he should resign in favour of representatives of the 'Third Force', a disparate group of non-communist opponents, who would reach peace with the totalitarian North Vietnamese Stalinist regime. The US aid ceiling was consequently reduced from $2.1 billion to $1.1 billion. Even this figure was revised down to $900 million by the House Committee in December 1973 for the 1974 fiscal year, covering both South Vietnam and Laos. The part allowed to Saigon would be $813 million. With about $723 million already obligated, only $90 million remained to carry the Vietnam Programme for the remaining six months of the fiscal year. The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) had expended more supplies and munitions in its recent campaigns to blunt the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) offensives, a surge in spending of over $200 million. Major General Murray persuaded the South Vietnamese to implement a $33 million budget saving, which involved the ending of the military-dependant shelter-house building programme, the improvement of lines of communications and a reduction in spare parts procurements for the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) and Vietnamese Navy (VNN). They tried to cope with the already critical shortages of $180 million in ground munitions, $5 million for medical supplies, $4.3 million for subsistence and $8 million for air munitions. A project to purchase additional LST ships for the VNN was abandoned, a decision that would later have grave consequences.

The US aid reduction forced the ARVN to reduce ammunition expenditures. Particularly hard hit by the constraints were artillery units. These tucks are being loaded with 105mm artillery shells at the Cam Ranh military harbour. (US Army)

Consequently, the ARVN's Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, commander of the central Logistic Command, issued strict directives to conserve equipment and ammunition. Despite these efforts, by mid-1974, ARVN stocks of 105mm shells – its main artillery munitions – were dangerously low, with only 52 days of supply remaining, and less if facing a major North Vietnamese offensive. The situation was also



By the end of 1974, ARVN stocks of ammunition were down to three months of high-intensity combat. Artillery units were now authorised to only engage clearly identified targets, while interdiction fire against suspected areas was denied. This battery of M101 105mm howitzers is firing against North Vietnamese attackers in the Mekong Delta area. (ARVN)

Budgetary cuts forced a reduction of more than half for the ARVN's transportation means. Many units could no longer be transported in vehicles, like these M35 trucks, but had to walk to their operating areas. (ARVN)

troubling for infantry ammunition stocks as well as for replacement barrels for M16 rifles. With 121,000 tonnes of ammunition, the ARVN projected that it could sustain moderate combat operations for nine months, but that would be reduced to three months if it was obliged to withstand a serious North Vietnamese offensive like that of 1972. The supply system was also impacted by a lack of spare parts for teletype equipment. Lack of batteries affected the availability of the AN/PRC-25, the standard infantry radio, with operational readiness decreased to 67%. A lack of spares also reduced the number of available armoured vehicles and lorries by a third.

The VNAF was hard hit by these conservative measures too. The number of sorties was reduced, particularly for the helicopter fleet. Gone were the days of regimental air assaults. Orders were given to fighter-bomber pilots to deliver their attacks above the medium (37mm) flak range to minimise losses, but to the detriment of the precision of air strikes. Gone also was the promise of one-for-one replacement for each lost aircraft. Only when South Vietnamese troops were in direct contact with the enemy were the pilots authorised to make low-level attacks for close air support. During the year since the 'ceasefire', the VNAF had lost 281 aircraft (including 66 transferred back to the USAF) and had received only eight Cessna O-1s in exchange.

The VNN had lost 58 ships and boats, none of which were replaced. These budgetary cuts had the gravest effects on the mobility of the South Vietnamese forces, which was the sole advantage they still had over their enemy. Forced to thinly disperse its assets to cover countless villages and cities and myriad bridges and other infrastructure, the ARVN could now no longer always count on a rapid redeployment of its units by air or by boat to counter an enemy thrust on a sector. That advantage was fast disappearing.

Saigon was unable to reverse the trend by seeking more aid from Washington, despite the fast-deteriorating situation. The US Congress was now overtly hostile, reducing any initiative from the Presidency by issuing the War Power Resolutions in November 1973, a bill prohibiting the president from declaring war or engaging in military operations without congressional consent. In fact, while the aid of the communist countries to Hanoi remained stable, worse was still to come for the South Vietnamese with the new Congress vote for aid for the 1975 fiscal year, which amounted to only $700 million. That total, furthermore, covered all shipping expenses, certain undelivered items from the previous fiscal year and the operational cost of the DAO itself, leaving less than $500 million to be applied

The fuel allowance reduction also heavily impacted the operations of the over 900 helicopters of the VNAF and their sortie rate was cut in half. At that time, most of the UH-1H helicopters had received an infra-red suppression kit installed on the exhaust jet engine, like on the one shown here. (VNAF)

The budget restrictions also impaired the South Vietnamese medical services. Evacuation by air of the wounded now became more scarce, lowering further the morale of the troops in the field. (VNAF)

The VNAF had received 32 C-130A transports, equipping two squadrons. However, many suffered from wing spar structural damage as well as leaking fuel tanks. Budget cuts meant that most of them could not been repaired adequately. By early 1975, only an average of 14 were available for daily operations. (Pham Quang Khiem)

to the operational requirements of the South Vietnamese armed forces. That led the North Vietnamese commander-in-chief, Senior General Van Tien Dung, to declare that now "Saigon was forced to fight a poor's man war." The new commander of the DAO, Major General Homer Smith, who took up his post in September 1974, helped to distribute that shrinking allotment to various competing branches of the South Vietnamese military. The VNAF would receive just $160 million; less than 30% of its requirements. After much heated debate, the service could proceed with the procurement of the long-awaited new Northrop F-5E fighters. It was initially envisaged to procure 75 airframes out of an order of 125. Finally, to cut costs, only 54 were ordered and delivered to re-equip three fighter squadrons. By December 1974, the VNAF was nevertheless forced to disband 10 squadrons, putting 224 aircraft in storage, among them the 61 A-1 Skyraider attack aircraft, all 52 C-7 transports and the 31 remaining forward air control O-2A Skymasters. The service also slashed its training programme, closing most of its schools and redirecting all their personnel towards operational units to bolster them in anticipation of the North Vietnamese wide-scale offensive.

The VNN would have to make do with only $9 million and had no choice other than to disband 21 of its 44 riverine units, a decision that had a profound impact on the security of the Mekong Delta, which was thereafter subjected to increasing communist infiltrations. The ARVN would finally get $410 million, half of what it needed for bare minimum functional and operational tasks. More draconian measures were applied. Only 55% of its transportation could be fuelled, and tactical movement required the approval of the corps commanders. Ammunition issues were even more rigidly controlled. Each soldier was now allotted only two hand-grenades instead of six and four rifle clips when going out on patrol, even though the level of combat in many individual engagements was equivalent to the most intense periods of 1968 or 1972. Bandages and surgical dressings, meanwhile, were washed and reused. Artillery fire was now directed only against clearly identified targets. No more interdiction fire on suspected areas was now allowed.

To save costs and streamline their organisation, it was also decided to reorganise the Ranger Corps. Instead of having three different types of Ranger battalions – organic, border and independent – the reform

By December 1974, the VNAF was forced to disband 10 of its squadrons due to budgetary cuts. Among them were the three transport units equipped with 51 C-7B Caribous. (Pham Quang Khiem Collection)

With less than 30% of its budgetary requirements fulfilled, the VNAF was forced to restrict the use of ammunition. Most of the fighter-bombers were deployed with half of their usual payload, like this F-5A of 63rd Fighter Wing of Bien Hoa AB, taking off with just two Mk-117 750lb bombs instead of the usual four. The policy was later reversed, with the aircraft then carrying their full war load but flying fewer missions. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

The only bright spot for the VNAF was the receipt of 54 brand new F-5E fighters that re-equipped three squadrons: two at Bien Hoa AB and one at Da Nang AB. (USAF)

created only a single type of unit. The reasoning behind the disbanding of nine Ranger battalions out of 54 in December 1973 was to increase to 15 the regimental-sized Ranger groups, of two battalions each. These groups would serve as a corps reserve. To further increase corps reserve troops, several platoons of the Popular Force (PF) were disbanded in favour of the battalions of the Regional Force (RF), themselves now grouped into light regiments at the disposal of the corps' commanders. But both these new RF and Ranger regiments were lacking in term of transportation, logistic support and firepower, and could not replace regular regiments. In some cases, when redeployed outside their usual operating areas, away from their families, many of their troops deserted, such as the Rangers of the disbanded 44th Tactical Zone in the Mekong Delta area sent to I Corps.

In mid-October 1974, the ARVN JGS (Joint General Staff) restricted major army operations, at corps level, to only two at a time for more than 10 days apiece each month. Consequently, directives were issued to each corps to limit to one operation at divisional level for no more than 10 days a month. This was hardly an ideal situation for an armed force on the eve of its final battle for survival.

All these measures had a profound impact on the morale of the armed forces personnel, who meanwhile had to cope with a high inflation rate of over 65% to sustain their families. An internal census by mid-1974 revealed that over 80% of the respondents indicated that they had not eaten meat in the last three months, and that even rice was lacking. Cases of malnutrition were reported, even with Air Force officers. Pilfering supplies and fuel to resell on the black market increased, as well as the hideous

practice of helicopter pilots in the Mekong Delta demanding payment for the evacuation of casualties. Acts of unruliness or drug abuse increased, as well as the desertion rate, particularly with the RF. Despite this grim situation, American observers were amazed that so many of the South Vietnamese servicemen continued to fight.

In a premonitory assessment to Congress in April 1974, the US Deputy Ambassador in Saigon, Wolfgang Lehmann, noted that the ARVN was now reduced to "a starvation diet" and indicated that "a reduction of 50 percent of the promised aid will tip the balance in Hanoi irrevocably in favour of a decision of a military option". He added that "there is no doubt the South Vietnamese will not quit but will fight". The DAO predicted that by the end of the financial year (30 June 1975), the ARVN would be almost out of fuel and down to a 30-day supply of ammunition. Its commander, Major General Murray, stated in August 1974 that if the trend was not reversed, the United States should "write off South Vietnam as a bad investment and a broken promise".

The VNN was also forced to disband 21 of its 44 riverine units. (US Navy)

The slashing down of the VNN had a profound impact on the security of the Mekong Delta, which was subjected to increasing communist infiltrations. The North Vietnamese were even able to deploy some artillery pieces there, such as this 105mm howitzer, to harass the ARVN outposts. (PAVN)

Due to the gravity of the situation, some high-ranking ARVN officers and officials of the DAO and the US Embassy began to toy with the idea of reducing the territory controlled by Saigon's government to be on a par with the reduced military budget. In April 1974, the ARVN JGS commander, Lieutenant General Cao Van Vien, asked Lieutenant General Dong Van Khuyen, commander of the Central Logistic Command, to probe President Thieu about what amounted to a taboo political issue. He was sternly brushed aside, accused of defeatism. Still, even if Thieu had heeded Vien's advice and sought to pull back to more defensible positions, logistically and politically it would have been an extraordinarily difficult proposition. While the president was constantly urging his people to defend every inch of the country, and to never accept a coalition government with the Communists – labelling it "a sure path to death" – reversing that trend by giving up important cities like Hue or Da Nang, would have catastrophic consequences for his political standing. A retreat to a Saigon–Mekong Delta redoubt would also have meant moving and resettling millions of people. Such a massive population relocation, even in peacetime, would have overwhelmed Saigon's resources. Imagine realising such a plan if the North Vietnamese attacked during this effort. Unable to act decisively, Thieu desperately clung to the idea that the new US President, Gerald R. Ford – who replaced Nixon, who resigned in August 1974 – would fulfil the former president's promises and rescind the decisions of Congress. However, the secretive Thieu, who shared his thoughts with only a very limited circle of trustees, had by now well integrated the possibility of exchanging real estate in the face of the drastic cuts in US aid. It was an option that he would in the end implement, under pressure, with catastrophic consequences.

The fast-deteriorating economic situation led to increased political hostility by the 21 opposition political and religious parties, mostly regionally based, even more so when the government decided to curtail their activities in favour of the regime's dominant Democracy Party, that held most of the seats in the National Assembly and the Senate. Another concern was President Thieu's project to amend the constitution, allowing him to stand for a third term in the next election. New rules were also brought in to limit the rather free South Vietnamese press system, with its 29 daily newspapers. The trade unions responded with strikes, while demonstrations and riots took place in major cities over the increase in price of basic consumer goods or the new drafting law that lowered the conscription age to 17. This forced Thieu to nominate a new cabinet in October 1973, but apart from a few lower-ranking posts being handed to members of the opposition, it remained largely a Democracy Party government. However, some Catholic activists and pre-eminent Christian leaders, traditionally allied to the Thieu regime, now opposed him by setting up a highly publicised anti-corruption campaign in May 1974 and asking him to revive and widen the prerogatives of the Anti-Corruption Committee that had forced the resignation of several ministers and officers.

His political standing weakened, Thieu, always suspicious of a coup that would topple him from power, had for a long time clipped the wings of his military by nominating trustees for crucial posts, irrelevant of their capabilities. The great North Vietnamese Easter Offensive of 1972 had forced him, under duress, to remove a series of failing commanders and replace them with professionally competent officers. But now, a combination of political and enemy pressure pushed him into a new reshuffle of the military hierarchy in October 1973. In a decision that combined both political and military reasons, the III Corps commander, Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Minh, was transferred to become commander of the Capital Military District, the area around Saigon. The commanders of the 5th and 25th Divisions of III Corps were relieved of their positions for corruption. In the following weeks, Thieu removed or forced into retirement a total of 367 officers, including several other division commanders and five province chiefs. In November, he also relieved the Quand Duc Province chief and the 23rd Division commander of II Corps for their failure to retake two lost hamlets during fighting with the PAVN's Unit 95, a division-sized task force that tried to sever Routes 8B and 14 in the southern Central Highlands. The military reshuffling culminated nearly a year later with the removal of three of the four corps commanders.

On 30 October 1974, Lieutenant General Pham Quoc Thuan, commander of III Corps, was replaced by Lieutenant General Du Quoc Dong. Lieutenant General Nguyen Khoa Nam also replaced Lieutenant General Nguyen Vinh Nghi, which proved a good choice as the spartan Nam instilled a new spirit in the Mekong Delta, reshuffling his command and markedly improved the situation. Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Toan, one of the best ARVN armoured commanders, was removed from II Corps after a new anti-corruption press campaign. He was replaced, on 5 November 1974, by Major General Pham Van Phu, a courageous officer and excellent division commander, but who did not have the required ability – through lack of education and training – to assume such an important command. Thieu's choice would have tragic consequences in the events that unfolded in the spring of 1975.

2
THE PARACEL ISLANDS BATTLE

As the months passed, Thieu still hoped – in a clear case of wishful thinking – that the new détente policy that Washington had developed with Moscow and Beijing would lead to some leverage on their part towards their North Vietnamese ally, restraining them in their desire to conclude the conflict militarily. But even that last hope would be shattered by an unexpected naval incident in the Paracel Islands that revealed the new nature of the relationship that was developing between the United States and China; the beginning of an unwritten alliance against the Soviet Union within the wider context of the Cold War.

Since the departure of the French from their Indochina colony in 1955, the contested Paracel Islands had been claimed by South Vietnam and China. They are roughly equidistant from both countries: 300km south of Yuli, Hainan Island, and 370km east of Da Nang. The archipelago is divided into two island groups: to the northeast is the Amphitrite Group, with Woody Island the largest feature; to the southwest is the Crescent Group, with the main Pattle, Money and Robert Islands on the western side and Drummond, Duncan and Palm Islands on the eastern side. About 80km of water separates the Amphitrite and Crescent Groups. Since 1959, the South Vietnamese had implanted small outposts on the Crescent Group, while the Chinese had a small base manned by militia on Woody Island of the Amphitrite Group. Until 1973, both sides made episodic naval patrols to reassert their rights. However, with the prospect of offshore oil deposits in the area, Saigon granted permission for drilling to Western companies. China, too, began drilling an oil well on Woody Island in December 1973, reinforcing its garrison to two naval infantry battalions. As early as July 1973, a series of provocations and reprisals led the contenders onto a collision course. In August, the South Vietnamese seized six islands in the Spratlys, another contested group of islands, 700km southeast of Paracel. A month later, Saigon proclaimed its ownership of 10 islands of this group. In October, numerous Chinese trawlers appeared in the vicinity of the South Vietnamese-held Crescent Group. Militias even reoccupied Duncan Island, from where they had been evicted in 1959. They were disembarked from an LST, escorted by two Kronshtadt-class submarine chasers which also drove off the

The VNN frigate *HQ-5 'Tran Binh Trong'*, a WHEC Casco-class cutter that was involved in the fighting for the Paracel Islands on 19 January 1974. Damaged, like most of the South Vietnamese warships involved, the ship limped back towards Da Nang. (VNN)

Due to bad Intelligence, the VNN landed SEAL commandos to reoccupy Duncan and Palm Islands, where they met heavy resistance from entrenched Chinese troops. Some of these elite troops are seen here in their rubber boats during the National Day military parade in Saigon. (ARVN)

The Chinese Type 04-class Kronshtadt-class submarine chaser No. 274, minutes before the battle of 19 January 1974. Heavily damaged, it was forced to stop at Boisée Island for repairs before limping back towards Hainan Island. The South Vietnamese claimed it as sunk. (VNN)

One of the two Chinese Hainan-class submarine chasers, No. 281, that was involved in the Paracel Islands battle. (VNN)

South Vietnamese fishing boats. The VNN retaliated by harassing the Chinese trawlers, seizing several boats in November 1973, their crews being detained in Da Nang before their release. On 10 January 1974, two Chinese trawlers again disembarked militia to temporarily occupy Robert Island.

Countering that last move, six days later, the VNN sent the frigate *HQ-16* to reinforce the platoon-sized garrison of the Crescent Group. Upon arriving, while manoeuvring to land 15 troops on Money Island, it surprised armed Chinese trawlers Nos 407 and 416, which were landing reinforcements on Robert Island. *HQ-16* tried to chase them away by firing warning shots. Saigon, now determined to reassert its sovereignty of the area, dispatched additional ships under Captain Ha Van Ngac: the destroyer *HQ-4*, the frigate *HQ-5* and the corvette *HQ-10*, one of the two engines of the latter breaking down en route. Upon receiving this news, the Chinese South Sea Fleet ordered the Type 04-class Kronshtadt-class submarine chasers Nos 271 and 274 to proceed to the Crescent Group from Yulin Naval Base in Hainan Island, followed by two Type 010 (Chinese version of the Soviet T-43-Class) oceangoing minesweepers, Nos 389 and 396. Finally, two Hainan-class submarine chasers, Nos 281 and 282, were also dispatched from Shantou. They received air cover during their high-speed transit from standing patrols of Shenyang J-6 fighters.

On 17 January, the destroyer *HQ-4* landed troops to remove the Chinese flags planted on Robert and Money Islands. The confrontation continued on the following day with the Chinese trawler No. 407 being rammed and damaged. Meanwhile, the VNN received orders to reoccupy Duncan Island. The operation was launched on the early morning of 19 January when *HQ-16* and *HQ-10* cut

The VNN corvette *HQ-10 'Nhut Tao'*, a PCE-842-class patrol craft, was sunk and went down near the Antelope Reef along with its captain, Major Nguyen Van Tha. (VNN)

Listing slightly to port, the VNN frigate *HQ-16 'Ly Thuong Kiet'*, badly damaged, was moved to Da Nang harbour. In addition to being hit by Chinese shells, it was also struck by mistake by the frigate *HQ-5*. (VNN)

On 20 January 1974, the Chinese amphibious assault against the South Vietnamese garrisons on Robert, Pattle and Money Islands were preceded by attacks by the J-6 fighter-bombers of the PLANAF. (PLAN)

across the central lagoon of the Crescent Group. Meanwhile, *HQ-4* and *HQ-5* had circled around Money Island from the south with the landing troops. *HQ-5* landed a 40-man group of SEAL commandos. They encountered fierce resistance from the entrenched Chinese troops, suffering three killed and several wounded, and were forced to withdraw in their rubber boats. A smaller landing party also met opposition on the nearby Palm Island and withdrew. Shielded behind Duncan Island, the Chinese task force split in two and surprised the South Vietnamese. Even though the Vietnamese had the edge in terms of ships' displacements and firepower, the Chinese commander chose to close in to make use of the higher speed and agility of his ships, aided by the emitting of smoke screens.

The Kronshtadt-class submarine chasers Nos 271 and 274 boldly surged forward, heading towards *HQ-4* and *HQ-5*, and minesweepers Nos 389 and 396 went after *HQ-10* and *HQ-16*. The two Hainan-class submarine chasers were kept in reserve. Still engaged in the recovery of their disembarked men, the VNN commander ordered his ships to engage the charging Chinese at a distance of 2,000 metres. *HQ-4* and *HQ-5* opened fire and hit the Kronshtadt No. 274, while *HQ-10* and *HQ-16* also fired on the minesweepers. However, adroitly exploiting the blind spots of the VNN radar-directed guns at such close distance, the Chinese ships raked their enemies with their twin 25mm, twin 37mm and 85mm guns. The battle raged on for 40 minutes, the Chinese concentrating their fire on the radars and communications gear of the enemy ships. The minesweepers focused their fire on the corvette *HQ-10*, putting its remaining engine out of service. The crew was ordered to evacuate the ship, but its captain, Major

Nguyen Van Tha, remained on board and went down with his ship near the Antelope Reef. Meanwhile, the minesweeper No. 396 was hit hard by 127mm fire and appeared to be sinking, but managed to beach on Duncan Island. The two Hainan-class submarine chasers, Nos 271 and 274, now entered the fray, shielded behind smoke screens, and engaged the South Vietnamese at close range with their twin 25mm and 57mm guns, and even ASW RBU-1200 rockets. The VNN ships were ordered to disengage to allow more room for directing their heavier 76.2mm and 127mm guns. But in the confusion, the frigate *HQ-16* was hit by a 127mm shell from *HQ-5*, which was aiming at the Kronshtadts. With all their ships damaged, 53 men killed and many injured, the VNN task force withdrew towards Da Nang, having been comprehensively defeated, covered by a flight of VNAF F-5As. Although the US Navy had dispatched a flotilla of destroyers from the Philippines to monitor the fighting in the Paracel Islands, they observed from afar and did not lend help to the South Vietnamese, not even helping to rescue their sailors. Fortunately, the passing Dutch oiler *Koponiella* picked up 23 survivors from *HQ-10*. On 29 January, some 15 South Vietnamese soldiers who escaped in lifeboats were rescued by fishing boats near Qui Nhon. The damaged Chinese ships limped back towards Hainan, but the submarine chaser No. 274 was forced to stop at Boisée Island for repairs.

The withdrawal of South Vietnamese ships after the naval engagement with the Chinese on 19 January 1974 was made under air cover from VNAF F-5As of the 538th Fighter Squadron based in Da Nang. The unit would be re-equipped with the brand-new F-5E at the year's end. (USAF)

Some of the 48 South Vietnamese prisoners taken by the Chinese during the battle for the Paracel Islands in January 1974. They were later released in Hong Kong through the Red Cross. (PLAN)

The Chinese moved quickly to occupy all the ARVN's occupied islands. The South Sea Fleet mobilised one frigate, five torpedo boats and eight patrol boats to support the amphibious flotilla of armed trawlers, patrol boats and minesweepers. The assault on 20 January was preceded by strafing and rocketing of Robert, Pattle and Money Islands by J-6 fighter-bombers. All the objectives were quickly seized, the Chinese capturing 48 prisoners, including an American liaison officer from the US embassy in Saigon. All were later released in Hong Kong through the Red Cross.

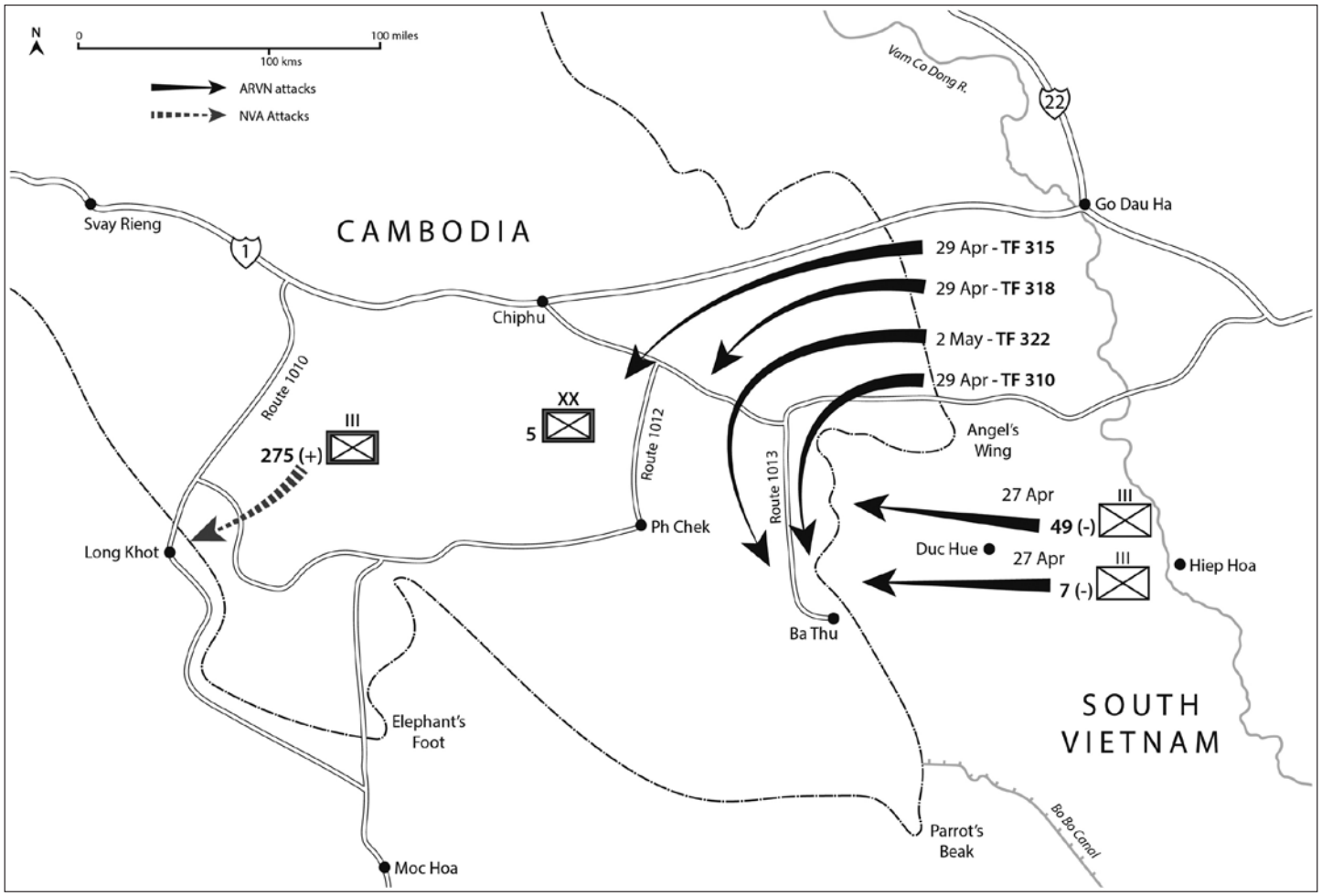
President Thieu flew to Da Nang to plan a reconquest of the islands. This proposed operation consisted of a VNN Task Force of six destroyers and frigates, supporting an amphibious element comprising Marines, LSTs and patrol craft. At the same time, Saigon requested the support of the US Navy to shield the impending operation by deploying ships between the Paracel Islands and Hainan, but to no avail. The scheme was scrubbed when it was learnt that the Chinese instructed the East Sea Fleet of Guanzhou to send three Type 01 Chengdu-class guided-missile frigates, armed with SY-1 anti-ship missiles, to the Paracel Islands, while three Type 033 Romeo-class submarines of the 32nd Submarine Flotilla were sighted between Da Nang and Pattle Island. In the following weeks, the Chinese – under the command of the PLAN deputy's chief of staff, Liu Huaqing – continuously sent reinforcements to the occupied islands, fortifying them, deploying anti-aircraft guns and building shore facilities and an airstrip. In a final attempt to reverse the situation, Thieu ordered a major air strike against an assembly of 40 Chinese ships that was photographed by a VNAF RF-5A Freedom Fighter. By early March 1974, some 120 F-5As were assembled at Da Nang armed and ready to go but at the last instant, on the insistence of the Americans, the operation was cancelled. Facing a growing series of North Vietnamese offensives, this was a diversion of now-scarce military resources that Saigon could not afford.

By early March 1974, the Chinese had reinforced considerably their garrisons on the Paracel Islands, fortifying them to deter any South Vietnamese attempt to retake them. These BTR-50 armoured personnel carriers (APCs) were waiting to embark on landing ships at the harbour on Hainan Island. (PLAN)

3
THE LAST OFFENSIVE INTO CAMBODIA

As previously described in *Target Saigon* Volume 1, Hanoi decided to push ahead military and logistic preparations as soon as the last US troops departed South Vietnam at the onset of the Paris 'peace agreement' in January 1973. Under the tutorship of Communist Party secretary general Le Duan and the chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Politburo, Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap, the PAVN decided to accelerate its planning to take over South Vietnam before the 'strategic opportunity' window closed, at a time of a perceived temporarily weak America, wary of military foreign interventions and deeply divided politically. After reviewing the previous year of limited offensives at division-level, the CMC and the General Staff concluded that, despite heavy losses, the PAVN had finally retaken the initiative over the ARVN since the 1972 Easter Offensive. Giap consequently decided to accelerate the pace of operations, aiming to continue to wear down the ARVN and consolidate the 'liberated areas' from which the final blow would be unleashed at the opportune moment. Backed by the resolution to resume total war adopted at the 21st Plenum of the Communist Central Committee on 4 October 1973, he ordered a new wider campaign for the dry season of 1974, escalating into corps-level offensives, which the PAVN commander of the B2 Front that covered the southern half of South Vietnam, General Tran Van Tra, called 'strategic raids'. The new campaign would start in March with a series of attacks carried out against the strategic ARVN III Corps, encompassing Saigon, and would then be extended to the ARVN I Corps, around Hue and Da Nang, in May, and finally to the Central Highlands area. Meanwhile, pressure continued to be applied in the Mekong Delta sector.

However, pre-empting the new North Vietnamese campaign, the ARVN launched a series of powerful combined-arms operations aimed at impeding fresh communist logistic corridors being opened from their Cambodian sanctuaries in the salient protruding into South Vietnam known as the Parrot's Beak. This was an extension of the Cambodian Svay Rieng Province, fully occupied by the PAVN, excepting the regional capital, where a Cambodian garrison was besieged. From there, the PAVN 5th Division could pose a threat towards Go Dau Ha, astride the road linking Saigon to Tay Ninh south-eastward; or against the Kien Tuong and Dinh Tuong Provinces, south-westward, on the fringes of the demarcation lines of the ARVN III and IV Corps. There were also numerous PAVN warehouses, garages and training grounds. By mid-January 1974, ARVN Intelligence detected enemy preparations facing the city of Tri Phap, on the western salient. If the North Vietnamese Z-15 and Z-18 Independent Regiments and elements of the 5th Division could take the place and be entrenched there, they would later pose a very serious threat against the strategic Route 4, linking Saigon to the Mekong Delta. On 12 February, the South Vietnamese struck first in a combined pincer movement of their 7th



The South Vietnamese offensive into the Svay Rieng Province of Cambodia in April 1974. (Map by George Anderson)

The ARVN incursion into Cambodia was efficiently supported by the VNAF. Most of the close air support was provided by the 74th Tactical Wing of Binh Thuy. Here, a pilot of the 526th Fighter Squadron poses beside his A-37B ground attack aircraft, armed with the usual load of six Mk-82 500lb bombs. (Pham Quang Khiem Collection)

and 9th Divisions. The former unit launched an armoured task force made up of the 12th Regiment, two battalions of the 10th Regiment and two troops of cavalry, attacking westward. Meanwhile, the 9th Division attacked eastward with a task force organised around the 14th Regiment, one battalion of the 16th Regiment and two cavalry troops. Finally, sealing the southern fringe of the battlefield, the ARVN 10th Regiment attacked northward with the 2nd ACS (Armoured Cavalry Squadron). The speed of the onslaught broke the North Vietnamese resistance in a week, and they abandoned more than 500 dead on the field, along with tons of munitions. However, the PAVN B2 Front rushed in 3,000 reinforcement troops, comprising elements of the 6th and 174th Regiments of the 5th Division, along with artillery. The fighting continued until the end of March, the

Troops of the 12th Regiment of the ARVN 7th Division, moving against North Vietnamese positions near the Cambodian border. (ARVN)

Fearing that the PAVN 5th Division would cut Route 4 from its sanctuary in Cambodia, the ARVN 7th and 9th Divisions launched an attack against it near Tri Phap on 12 February 1974. A column of M41 tanks and M113 APCs moves in to engage in the southern sector of the operation. (ARVN)

The Rangers of TF-315 encountered stiff resistance from the PAVN 5th Division. Here, a soldier engages the enemy with his M79 grenade launcher. (ARVN)

ARVN introducing the 7th Ranger Group and additional armoured units. The North Vietnamese were finally forced to cross back over the border, leaving behind over 1,100 dead.

The South Vietnamese were now determined to put out of action the PAVN 5th Division by planning a massive offensive against the Parrot's Beak salient in what would be the last ARVN incursion inside Cambodia. The scheme developed required a coordinated attack by 18 battalions of the ARVN III Corps pushing across the border from the west, while two battalions of the ARVN IV Corps would support the main drive on the eastern salient around the Moc Hoa sector. The South Vietnamese hastened their operation when two battalions of the PAVN 5th Division attacked the outpost of Duc Hue on the eastern salient, held by the 83rd Ranger Battalion, on 27 March. Although the assault was pushed back, the base was besieged and heavily hit by artillery for three weeks. The 25th ARVN Division came to the rescue, its advance being efficiently supported by VNAF, and the siege was lifted.

Either by design or reaction, the North Vietnamese now launched another attack against the town of Long Khot on the western salient, on the same 27 April afternoon that the ARVN was preparing to cross the border on its eastern side. The assault was led by the 275th Regiment of the PAVN 5th Division, supported by 105mm and 122mm artillery, plus one M41 and six captured M113s of the 33rd Company of the 26th Armoured Group but the local RF garrison held fast, thanks to excellent support by the VNAF, who flew 188 sorties. While North Vietnamese attention was focused on their western perimeter, the ARVN unleashed an assault of three armoured task forces (TF) of the 3rd Armoured Brigade of Brigadier General Tran Quang Khoi, one of the best South Vietnamese armour officers. The three columns, spearheading the offensive, crossed the border in parallel west of Go Dau Ha, penetrating as deeply as 15km before wheeling south and southwest into the South Vietnamese Hau Ngia Province. Making the main effort and the deepest penetration was TF-315, organised around the 15th ACS and a troop of Patton tanks, the 64th Ranger Battalion and a composite battery of 105mm and 155mm howitzers. That force of 20 M48s, 20 M41s and 100 M113s crossed into Cambodia through the rice fields south of Route 1 and attacked west, turning south short of the swampy ground east of Chi Phu, following the local Route 1012 towards the blocking position held by a IV Corps battalion near Phu Chek. It was screened on its right flank by a mobile RF battalion mounted on M113s that advanced along Route 1 about 12km inside the international border.

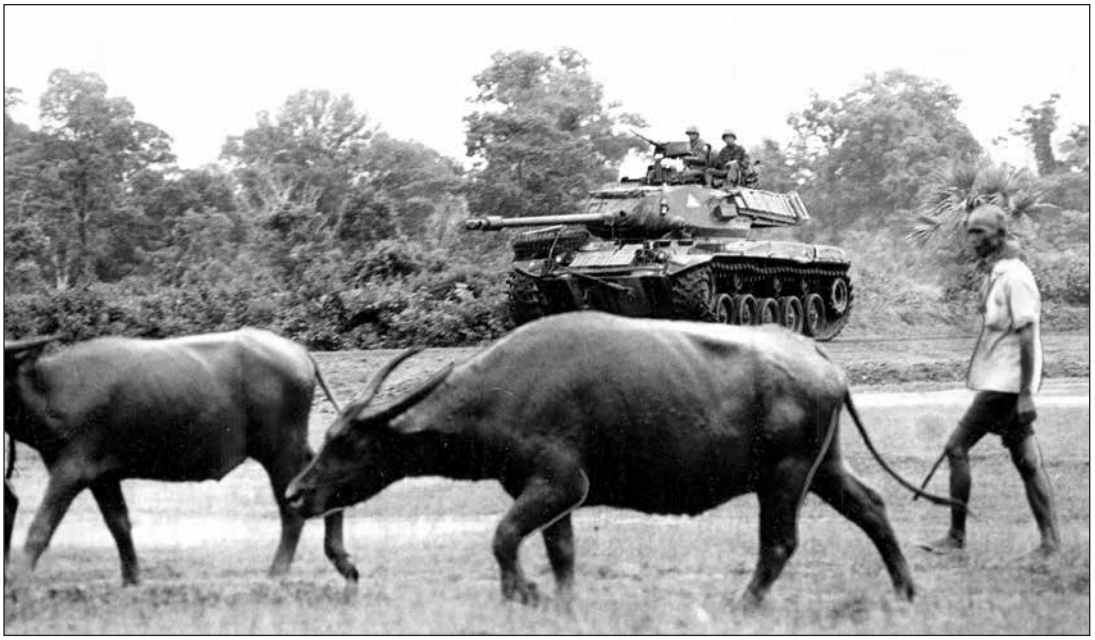
Along the centre axis, which started about 2km south of TF-315, was TF-318. Of the same composition as the latter, it was built around the 18th ACS, a Patton troop, a Ranger battalion and a 105mm howitzer battery. This column drove into Cambodia along the local Route 1013 and wheeled south inside TF-318.

TF-310, the only one of the attacking columns without Patton tanks, had a battalion each from the ARVN 18th and 25th Divisions, the M41s and M113s of the 10th ACS and an artillery battalion. It crossed into Svay Rieng Province along the Cambodian Route 1013, and wheeled south inside TF-318, generally along the international boundary. Kept in reserve at Go Dau Ha was TF-322, with two Patton troops, the 1st ACS, an infantry battalion and a battery of 105mm howitzers, ready to exploit opportunities uncovered by the attacking echelons.

Speed, audacity and superior air-ground coordination overwhelmed the North Vietnamese E-6 and 174th Regiments' resistance. During the first day of the offensive, the VNAF flew 200 close air support sorties. The main enemy supply depot was then assaulted by 54 UH-1H helicopters and the disembarked troops searched the storage pits when they were joined by the approaching tanks. Facing such an onslaught, the PAVN 5th Division was compelled to reduce the pressure at Long Khot and pulled back to defend its logistical installations. Despite fierce resistance, the North Vietnamese units were overturned and mauled. While the operation was planned for only three days, seeing the good results obtained, the South Vietnamese decided to extend it by a few days. Closing the trap, it was now the turn of IV Corps to be pushed inside Cambodia, attacking eastward with two task forces. One was composed by the 15th Regiment of the 9th ARVN Division and the 16th ACS; the

The cornerstone of the ARVN offensive against the Cambodian sanctuaries of the Parrot's Beak area was the 23rd Tank Squadron of the III Armoured Brigade. Equipped with M48 Patton tanks, the unit was subdivided into armoured Task Forces, made up of tanks, APCs and infantry, that spearheaded the incursion into the Cambodian Svay Rieng Province. (ARVN)

Troops of the 25th ARVN Division attacking towards Duc Hue to relieve the encircled outpost, that was attacked by the PAVN 5th Division. (ARVN)



The main thrust inside the Parrot's Beak was carried out by TF-315, a mechanized column made up of 140 tanks and APCs. Pictured is an M41 of the 15th ACS that penetrated inside Cambodia on 27 April 1974, in the area west of Go Dau Ha. (ARVN)

An M113 APC of TF-315, equipped with a dozer blade, secures a landing zone for a VNAF UH-1H helicopter that is bringing in ammunition. (ARVN

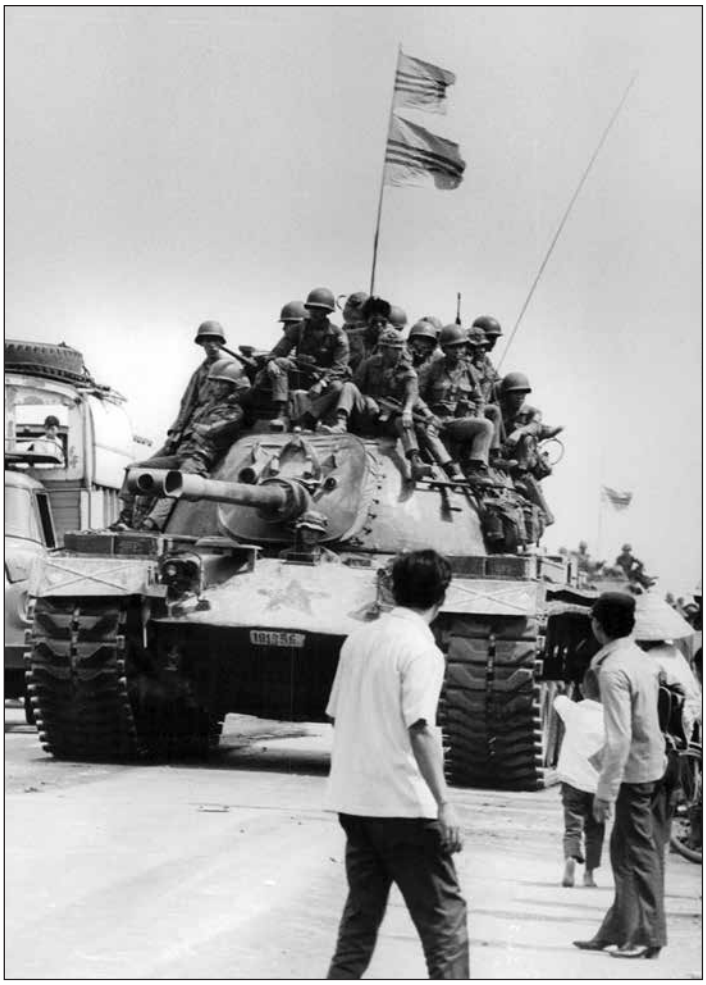
A column of M41s of the 18th ACS of TF-318 entered Cambodia, south of the TF-315 penetration axis, along the local Route 1013. (ARVN)

The ARVN's TF-318 overwhelmed most of the North Vietnamese defences by using the speed and firepower of its armoured units, in close coordination with VNAF air strikes. (ARVN)

On 14 May 1974, the main PAVN depot inside the Parrot's Beak was assaulted by 54 UH-1H helicopters that landed Rangers ahead of the approaching tanks columns. The sudden attack quickly overwhelmed North Vietnamese resistance. (VNAF

This North Vietnamese prisoner was taken while defending the Parrot's Beak main depot. He was brought back for interrogation on board an armoured M151 jeep. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

An M41 of the 10th ACS, part of TF-310, progressing across a stream to close the gap on the southern fringe of the Parrot's Beak. This was the only one of the attacking columns without Patton tanks. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



The triumphant return of the South Vietnamese forces involved in the destruction of the PAVN 5th Division inside the Parrot's Beak area in May 1974. That proved to be the last ARVN offensive operation of this scale, not only in Cambodia but anywhere else until the end of the war. (ARVN)

Even though the ARVN had temporarily thwarted the threat along the Parrot's Beak sector, forces were maintained there to avert any resumption of Communist infiltrations. This M41 of the 10th ACS is resting beside a Buddhist temple near the Cambodian border. (Ung Buu Hoang Nguyen Collection)

other included the 10th Regiment and the 6th ACS. The ARVN 7th Division was held in reserve and provided artillery support. The two task forces moved in, and in 12 days completely mauled the PAVN 275th Regiment, recovering 850 dead enemy soldiers.

Making the adjustment required by the situation, particularly the fact that the most lucrative contacts were being made in the southern sweeps of TF-318 and TF-310, TF-315 was ordered to withdraw from its northern axis on 2 May and returned to Go Dau Ha, where it reverted to the reserve. Meanwhile, the powerful TF-322 penetrated into the heart of another enemy storage area at the southern tip of the Parrot's Beak, its tanks methodically destroying the ammunition depots and vehicles found there, before wheeling toward Ba Thu, a long-time communist base. The battalions of the ARVN 25th Division continued their mopping-up operations between Duc Hue and Go Dau Ha and sealing any escape route from the eastern salient. The offensive ended on 10 May, the PAVN 5th Division being badly mauled and the B2 Front's 'strategic raids' having started very badly. However, this would be the last ARVN offensive of the war, the cut in American aid forcing it to elsewhere adopt a defensive posture.

4
A RAINY SEASON LIKE NO OTHER

Despite the heavy losses suffered by its units in the north-western sector of the ARVN III Corps, the stubborn commander of the PAVN B2 Front, Colonel General Tran Van Tra, was determined to carry out the plan of his 1974 campaign. He was the longest-serving communist officer operating in the same area, having previously fought the French around Saigon for 10 years. He returned to the B2 Front in late 1962 and served as either commander or deputy commander until the end of the war. Consequently, he had long believed that his command, the most important geographically, was the most important theatre in the war, and he repeatedly clamoured for more troops and equipment, to the point where he had developed a reputation at the General Staff for constant carping. As usual, the General Staff denied his request for several strategic-reserve divisions held in North Vietnam. Consequently, Tra's most important task was to strengthen his main-force units with available means and any additional supplies and equipment delivered to him. He then decided to form one light division for each of his subordinate Military Regions (MR) by combining the independent regiments, providing them with additional combat support elements and organising a division headquarter staff. As MR-7, the area encompassing most of the ARVN III Corps, had only two independent regiments, they were combined to form the understrength 6th Division. Similar, but full-strength divisions – the 8th and 4th – with three regiment, were created in MR-8 and MR-9 respectively. He could also count on a reinforced tank force when his 26th Armoured Group was brought up to brigade strength with six armoured battalions. But he had already lost a lot of time while the rainy season was approaching. The pendulum of the war in Vietnam had always swung in concert with the dry and wet seasons. Heavy combat raged during the dry period, roughly from October-May, with reduced fighting during the monsoon. But this time, while his poor recent performances had attracted a lot of critics from the General Staff, Tra was convinced that the ARVN's rapidly declining forces should be exploited to increase that trend. He therefore ordered

The B2 Front opened its rainy season campaign on 16 May 1974 when the PAVN 9th Division penetrated the Iron Triangle. It was supported by the T-54s tanks of the 22nd Battalion of the 26th Armoured Group. (PAVN)

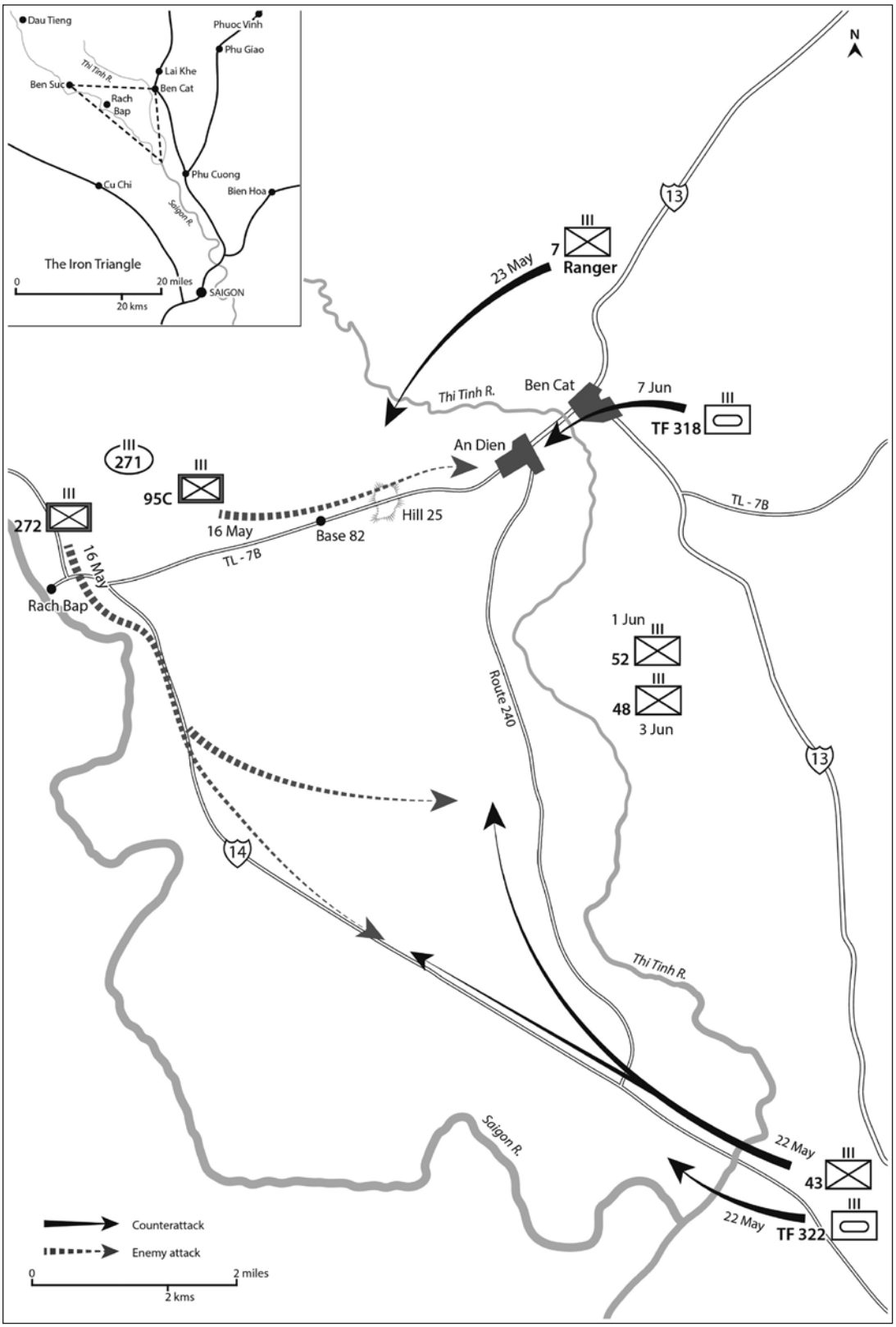
his forces to continue to maintain their offensive posture through the rainy season, whatever the difficulties this caused.

The first PAVN B2 Front action aimed to reduce a series of ARVN outposts along Route 13, running north of Saigon towards Cambodia. The PAVN 9th Division first occupied the RF outpost of Chi Linh in early April. Then, it was decided to eliminate once and for all the Tong Le Chon outpost, held by the ARVN 92nd Ranger Battalion of Lieutenant Colonel Le Van Ngon, which had been under siege for more than a year. However, it was now almost impossible for VNAF helicopters to pass through the anti-aircraft ring to bring in supplies and evacuate the wounded. The outpost was fiercely shelled but repulsed three consecutive assaults at the end of March. Ngon requested a rescue operation, knowing full well that this would require a divisional attack that the ARVN could not afford. On 11 April, the base was again attacked by a regimental force supported by tanks. After resisting all day, at nightfall – and disobeying orders to resist to the last man – Ngon asked the VNAF to stop dropping flares as he would try to evacuate the 255 survivors, including five wounded. All contacts were lost until the next day at 0900 hours, when a radio operator responded that they were moving through the jungle toward the ARVN enclave of An Loc. The ranks of the wounded had swollen by 14 during the night's action, with 35 more wounded during the withdrawal and four killed, but even these bodies were carried out to An Loc. The daring escape highlighted the high spirit and discipline of the unit, whose enduring resistance was fully exploited by Saigon's propaganda. However, with the fall of Tong Le Chon, the PAVN had unrestricted use of its important east–west communication line between its logistical depots in the Tay Ninh and Binh Long Provinces and control of the Saigon River corridor from its source to Dau Tieng. Furthermore, Route 13 running north from Chon Thanh was now completely interdicted, isolating An Loc, the city that had taken so much effort to relieve of its siege in 1972.

With his logistics now freed of ARVN interference, Tra envisaged a two-axis offensive, either side of Route 13. East of it, the PAVN 7th Division was to capture the bridge at Phu Giao, where Route 1A spanned the Son Be River, to isolate the ARVN 5th Division around Phuoc Vinh. When consolidated there, the 7th Division would push

Soldiers of the PAVN 9th Division man an 82mm mortar, opening fire against ARVN positions at An Dien. (PAVN)

The troops of the PAVN 9th Division entrenched themselves west of the Thi Thinh River, and went on to take Base 82 and An Dien. The machine gunner in the foreground is equipped with an RPD light machine gun. (PAVN)



The fighting in the Iron Triangle in May 1974. (Map by George Anderson)

on toward Phu Cuong and join forces with the other wing of the offensive carried out by the PAVN 9th Division. The 9th would strike north of the famous Iron Triangle, a long-time communist stronghold that had been the scene of numerous American offensives attempting to clear it out. However, the distance between the two thrusts was too great to provide mutual support and the ARVN III Corps was able to deal with them separately. Consequently, although they occurred simultaneously, they can best be described sequentially, beginning with the Iron Triangle.

Most of the fighting there occurred along Route 7, the main road that crossed the northern side of the Triangle. The Saigon and Tri Tinh Rivers formed the borders for the west and east sides respectively. The Tri Tinh joined the Saigon River near Phu Hoa at the southern apex of the Triangle, some 15km from Phu Cuong, capital of Binh Duong Province. The town was an important industrial and farming centre and contained the ARVN Engineer School. It was linked by a major highway with the large ARVN base of Phu Loi and further with Bien Hoa, its huge airbase and logistic depots. Lying as it did in the centre of the Saigon River corridor, at the junction of Routes 13 and 1A, and only around 15km from the outskirts of Saigon, Phu Cuong was vital to the defence of South Vietnam's capital. From there, the PAVN long-range artillery could pound the Tan Son Nhut airbase, Saigon's international airport. The battlefield itself was flat, almost featureless and covered by dense brush and undergrowth. The clearings, especially in the northern part, were thick with elephant grass, higher than a man's head. The surface was scarred by countless bomb and shell craters, so vehicular movement off the narrow, rough dirt roads was nearly impossible and even tracked vehicles had difficulty. A vast network of tunnels and trenches dug by the Viet Cong, most of them now caved-in and abandoned, laced the ground. The northern area was weakly defended by three ARVN outposts, from Rap Bach in the west to An Dien in the east. Each of these outposts, including Base 82 in the centre, was manned by a company of the 321st RF Battalion. Rap Bach was also linked by Route 14, which cut across the Triangle until it joined Route 13 north of Phu Cuong. But further back, on the eastern side of the Triangle, the ARVN 25th Division was strong with infantry, armour and mutually supporting firebases around Ben Cat, but only one bridge spanned the Thi Thinh River leading into the northern sector of the Triangle near An Dien.

It was in this last sector that the B2 Front opened its rainy season campaign on 16 May. The 272nd Regiment of the 9th Division

On 2 June 1974, when the ARVN succeeded in grabbing a bridgehead across the Thi Thinh River, it was counterattacked by the PAVN 9th Division, supported by T-54 tanks of the 22nd Armoured Battalion. This unit was virtually destroyed during the fighting for the northern part of the Iron Triangle. (PAVN)

While the ARVN steadily advanced to reoccupy An Dien and Base 82, the North Vietnamese reinforced their units with additional tanks and artillery, despite vigorous air attacks. These T-54s and D-44 85mm field guns were greeted with joy when they reached the North Vietnamese positions in the rubber plantations northwest of An Dien. (PAVN)

attacked Rach Bap, supported by 10 T-54s of the 22nd Battalion of the 26th Armoured Group, quickly overwhelming the village's defenders before going deeper inside the Triangle by rolling down Route 14. Meanwhile, the 95C Regiment attacked Base 82 and An Dien with 10 PT-76s. The 271st Regiment was held in reserve. The RF troops held for 36 hours before being forced to withdraw toward Ben Cat, but they still firmly held a small bridgehead west of the Thi Thinh River, covering the bridge. The ARVN III Corps commander, Lieutenant General Pham Quoc Thuan, reacted immediately by sending TF-318 of the 3rd Armoured Brigade to reinforce Ben Cat while securing the precious bridge. However, the structure appeared too weak for tanks to cross it, being damaged by enemy artillery and anti-tank missile fire. Furthermore, the North Vietnamese had entrenched themselves in front of the bridge, positioning 85mm field guns, tanks and AT-3 Sagger missiles. With the weather clearing, VNAF fighter-bomber strikes claimed six T-54s. It was decided that the main effort to retake the Iron Triangle would fall on the ARVN 18th Division, considered the best of the three constituents of III Corps.

However, lacking precise intelligence about the enemy, General Thuan overestimated his own strength and believed that he could retake the lost positions in five days. He was unaware that in less than a week, the PAVN 9th Division had poured reinforcements into the northern part of the Triangle, digging a complex series of mutually supporting fortified positions, supported by the 42nd and 75th Artillery Regiments with 105mm and 122mm howitzers, 120mm mortars and 85mm guns, with tanks available for counterattacks, and covered by a regiment of anti-aircraft artillery. Expert in defensive fighting, the North Vietnamese were determined to hold the northern Triangle at any cost. As it turned out, it would take the South Vietnamese six months to retake the lost ground. The phased counteroffensives were in part hampered by atrocious weather and the restrictions imposed on the use of ammunition and air support.

The scheme was to retake An Dien, before moving towards Base 82, a task to be carried out by the 52nd Regiment of the 18th Division and supported by TF-318 of the 3rd Armoured Brigade. The 7th Ranger Group would also attack Base 82 from the north to fix in place the North Vietnamese who could otherwise interfere with the An Dien battle. Meanwhile, TF-322 moved from Tay Ninh Province to Phu Cuong and was ordered to prepare to attack into the Iron Triangle from the south along Route 14 with the 43rd Regiment of the 18th Division to oppose the 272nd Regiment. The ARVN 25th Division also launched a diversionary operation along the west bank of the Saigon River to prevent the PAVN 9th Division from committing its remaining 271st Regiment. The 52nd Regiment, with a troop of M113s that had crossed over the Thi Thinh River on 2 June, was immediately pinned down by enfilade fire. During the same night, the PAVN 95C Regiment counterattacked with 10 T-54s. Another assault took place the next day with additional tanks,

but the South Vietnamese held firm. Meanwhile, ARVN engineers worked throughout the night with flashlights to remove 38 anti-tank mines and allow more vehicles to pass by, while continuing their work to reinforce the damaged bridge. With losses mounting, it was decided to relieve the 52nd Regiment with the 48th Regiment. The freshly committed unit then launched a direct attack against An Dien on 3 June, but was hit on its left flank by waves of infantry attacks, supported by eight T-54s and two K-63s of the 5th Company of the PAVN 22nd Armoured Battalion. Three enemy tanks and one APC were quickly destroyed by anti-tank teams armed with M72s. Despite intense artillery shelling, the 48th Regiment reoccupied An Dien the next day after intense hand-to-hand fighting, clearing each enemy trench and bunker with hand grenades. Hundreds of corpses littered the devastated village, and prisoners confirmed that the 95C Regiment was literally decimated. ARVN casualties numbered over 500, including 100 killed. The South Vietnamese now entrenched themselves for the expected counterattack, which came on the night of 5/6 June when the PAVN 9th Division committed its reserve 271st Regiment, supported by 14 T-54s. The ARVN pushed back the assault, destroying five tanks and damaging five others. While awaiting the rebuilding of the bridge to deploy its tanks for a further advance towards Base 82, the ARVN tried to push northward towards Rach Bap with TF-322. But its advance stalled after an advance of only 5km, its armour being unable to deploy in very dense bush and cratered terrain, where the enemy had created a series of defensive lines. The fighting in this southern sector of the Triangle degenerated into artillery duels and occasional savage, hand-to-hand fighting to seize enemy fortified positions.

With the Ben Cat bridge finally repaired, the M41 and M48 tanks of TF-318 finally crossed into An Dien to take the lead in the advance towards Base 82 along Route 1. The North Vietnamese had entrenched the 271st Regiment as well as the 141st Regiment of the 7th Division around the former ARVN base. The attack started on 8 June, but the route was blocked by a knocked-out T-54. As land to the sides of the route was flooded, ARVN engineers used explosives to blow up the tank and clear the road. The advance resumed and TF-318 reached Hill 25 that evening, about 1km from their objective. Here, the terrain again impeded full use of the ARVN armoured units. A dense rubber plantation to the northwest provided excellent concealment for supporting defence positions, while dense bush in the southern approach masked other bunkers. Advancing in two columns but lacking supporting infantry – having only an attached Ranger battalion – the attack quickly stalled. Minefields, AT-3 'Sagger' ATGWs (anti-tank guided weapon) and B-82 82mm recoilless guns halted the column 800m from Base 82, the attackers losing five armoured vehicles and a dozen more damaged. No progress was made on 11 June, and Base 82 was heavily hit by artillery and air strikes. The assault resumed with TF-315, withdrawn from its southern axis of advance. The new task force immediately faced stiff opposition and could not gain much ground. On 15 June, reinforced by the 43rd Regiment, the ARVN attacked again, but the push could not be consolidated due to a drastic cut in artillery and air support. The ARVN III Corps commander begged for 150,000 more artillery and mortar shells but got only 45,000. The South Vietnamese persisted, though, and a new assault was launched on 18 June by TF-318 and TF-322, the last reserve of the 3rd Armoured Brigade. One armoured column progressed north of Route 1, the other generally along the road. The enemy's anti-tank defences, primarily employing the 82mm recoilless gun, stopped the attack once again, destroying 11 M48s and 13 M113s. By early July, it was decided to pause the assaults and pull out the ARVN 18th Division, which had suffered 275 killed and 1,000 wounded, amounting to 25% losses for its infantry battalions; a high ratio for any battle.

The North Vietnamese tried to retake An Dien, now occupied by the ARVN 52nd Regiment of the 18th Division. The assault of 5 June 1974 was foiled, the PAVN losing five T-54 tanks, including this one. (ARVN)

These M41s of TF-318 advanced against fierce resistance towards Base 82 along Route 1. Many South Vietnamese armoured vehicles were knocked out, including some by AT-3 'Sagger' ATGW missiles. (ARVN)

The situation remained quiet for the rest of the summer due to the monsoon. By 7 September, the ARVN 5th Division resumed the attack. It sent in its 8th Regiment, supported by a small armoured troop. They reached the outer defences of Base 82, where, unable to go any further, they dug in. The next day, under constant enemy artillery shelling, mostly from 120mm mortars, they were forced to pull back

Advancing through dense bush which masked North Vietnamese bunkers, the ARVN Rangers suffered heavily, even with the support of M113 APCs. (ARVN)

to the base of Hill 25, where they were counterattacked by about 15 T-54s that destroyed three M41s and several M113s. The 9th Regiment now took over, attacking again on 19 September, with the armour of the 2nd ACS protecting its right flank and two Ranger battalions its left. Although the reconstituted 95C Regiment defended tenaciously, and North Vietnamese artillery support was heavy and accurate, the defenders gradually gave ground. On 4 October, the ARVN finally reoccupied Base 82.

The ARVN III Corps was now preparing to retake Rach Bap, the last stronghold still in North Vietnamese hands in the Iron Triangle. The defence of An Dien and Base 82 was turned over to Regional Forces and Rangers. That new offensive, starting on 14 November, would see battalions of each of the three divisions of the corps engaged. The 9th Regiment of the 5th Division advanced along Route 7, while the 48th and 52nd Regiments of the 18th Division entered the Triangle and attacked west towards the Saigon River. Meanwhile, elements of the 46th and 50th Regiments of the 25th Division moved into the rubber plantation north of Phu Hoa to prevent enemy infiltration across the Saigon River. On 20 November, the ARVN reoccupied the devastated town of Rach Bap after eliminating the last pockets of PAVN resistance. The Iron Triangle was again in South Vietnamese hands and the PAVN 9th

The ARVN committed practically the whole 3rd Armoured Brigade to retake Base 82. This M48 of the 23rd Tank Squadron is moving along Route 1A to join the battle. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

The ARVN was engaged in a six-month attritional campaign for the Iron Triangle during the second part of 1974. A wounded Ranger is here evacuated on board an M577, a command and control version of the M113 APC. (ARVN)

During the fighting for the Iron Triangle, North Vietnamese anti-tank teams inflicted heavy losses on ARVN armour. One of the most efficient weapons was the Soviet B-10 82mm recoilless gun used at close range. (PAVN)

An ARVN M48 opens fire against a North Vietnamese position during the relentless South Vietnamese advance towards Base 82. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Division had been badly mauled. As a fighting unit, it would not see action again until the following March.

Simultaneously with the offensive against the Iron Triangle, the B2 Front also attacked northeast towards Phu Giao with a great part of the PAVN 7th Division. The aim was to take the bridge crossing the Song Be River, south of the ARVN 5th Division's main base of Phouc Vinh. However, based on good intelligence, the ARVN 5th Division and TF-318 attacked the assembly area of the 209th Regiment in mid-May. Thereafter, the attack against the bridge defended by the 322nd RF Battalion failed. Only the 165th Regiment could interdict Route 1A, isolating the bridge sector. The ARVN 5th Division and TF-315, well supported by VNAF sorties, cleared the roadblock after a week of intense fighting. There were also limited North Vietnamese attacks beyond the Dong Nai River in Bien Hoa Province in July and August, which were all repulsed by local RF units. The communists also attacked a series of towns around Xuan Loc, on the eastern part of III Corps. The area was usually defended by the ARVN 18th Division, but taking advantage of this formation having been sent into the Iron Triangle, the PAVN launched their 33rd and 274th Regiments, supported by artillery and engineers, to overrun a series of outposts held by Regional Forces around Bao Binh and Rung La in May. It took the ARVN 8th Regiment of the 5th Division, the 7th Ranger Group and a troop of M48s a month to reconquer the lost positions. Finally, the North Vietnamese again tried to sever the corridor linking Saigon to Tay Ninh in August. The PAVN 6th Regiment of the 5th Division attacked a series of outposts west of Tay Ninh City, held by RF troops. The North Vietnamese advance along the Yam Co Dong River stalled at Luoc Tan, defended energetically by the RF 312th Battalion, which resisted several assaults led by T-54 tanks thanks to excellent close air support, but after holding for more than a week against superior forces, the position fell. The time thus gained allowed the ARVN 25th Division to consolidate its defences along Route 13, blocking any PAVN move against it.

The South Vietnamese captured this K-63 APC of the 5th Company of the PAVN 22nd Armoured Battalion during the fighting for the Iron Triangle. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

By any yardstick, the B2 Front rainy season offensive ended with very few gains to claim but suffered heavy losses. At the tactical level, the ARVN was still superior in terms of combined-arms operations, despite drastic cuts in logistics and air support. The lessons learned accelerated the trend of improving the PAVN ability in this field. Recognising the need to plan and coordinate the operation of multi-divisional forces, the B2 Front organised the 301st Army Corps, that in early 1975 would become the IV Strategic Army Corps (SAC). North Vietnamese Communist Party general secretary Le Duan reacted with dismay upon learning of General Tra's setback, and the losses directly affected the PAVN General Staff's 1975 plan for his command.

An ARVN M88 recovery vehicle was sent to recover this abandoned PAVN T-54. The damaged tank had been turned into an improvised pillbox on the road between An Dien and Base 82. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

While the fighting in Vietnam usually paused during the rainy season, the PAVN B2 Front continued its 'strategic raids' campaign throughout the 1974 monsoon season. (PAVN)

A VNAF UH-1H lifts troops of the ARVN 5th Division, interrupting traffic on Route 1A, to bring in reinforcements to counter a thrust by the PAVN 7th Division in the sector of Phu Giao in June 1974. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

5
TRUONG SAVES THE I CORPS AGAIN

Lieutenant General Ngo Quan Truong took over the I Corps when it was on the verge of collapse at the worst time of the North Vietnamese Easter offensive of 1972 (see *The Easter Offensive* Volume 1). He stopped the communist offensive at the gates of Hue, the former imperial capital, and, turning the tide, retook Quang Tri. Undoubtedly, General Truong was the most capable ARVN senior officer and had five divisions to hold his area facing North Vietnam across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Three of them were north of the Hai Van pass, the major chokepoint on Route 1 between Hue and Da Nang, the second largest city of South Vietnam, and two south of the pass. Because of the geographic isolation of the Quang Tri and Thua Thien Provinces and their proximity to North Vietnam, an ARVN command

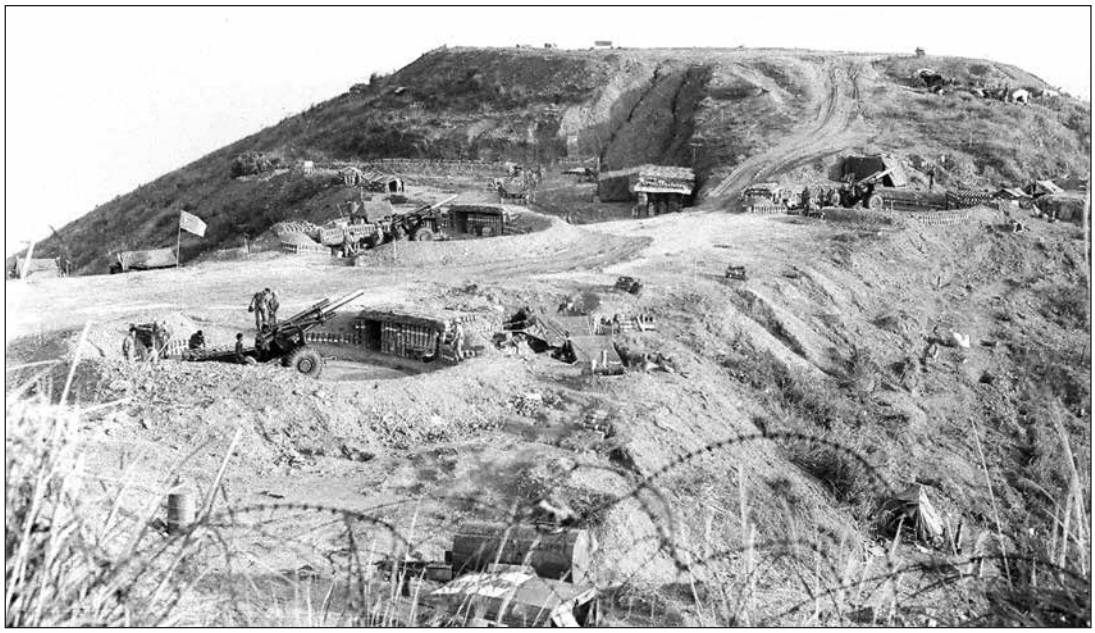
These ARVN tankers of TF-318 take a pause to buy ice creams during operations to clear out the PAVN 7th Division from the Song Be River. (ARVN)

subordinate to I Corps – I Corps Forward – was created for them. I Corps Forward was led by Lieutenant General Lam Quang Thi, who was concurrently Truong's deputy. Thi commanded South Vietnam's three finest divisions: the 1st Division, and the Marine and Airborne Divisions; the elite national reserve attached to I Corps since 1972. South of the Hai Van Pass were the ARVN 2nd and 3rd Divisions. This latter unit was stationed west and south of Da Nang. South of it was the 2nd Division, holding a wide swath of territory: from the middle of Quang Tin Province to the southern border of Quang Ngai Province. In addition to the five divisions, I Corps had the 1st Armoured Brigade, four Ranger groups and 50 RF battalions. The VNAF 1st Air Division provided air support with five fighter-bomber squadrons, including one with the brand-new F-5E.

In fact, the South Vietnamese held only the coastal plain with the main urban centres, with their forward positions anchored on a series of fire support bases (FSB) positioned atop the parallel mountain ridge that ran north to south. Beyond, the North Vietnamese occupied the high plateau, where they had opened several routes and positioned important logistic installations, particularly in the A Shau valley, around the former US base of Khe Sanh or Dong Ha, just across the DMZ. Hanoi was determined to eliminate the last isolated ARVN outposts outside the coastal defensive perimeter, but was also trying to breach it and advanced as much as possible towards the coastline to position their forces for the final offensive scheduled for 1975–76. Apart from a few occasional skirmishes, I Corps did not see any significant fighting throughout 1973. That would change with the new directives of the PAVN General Headquarters that had planned a series of sequential offensives. General Truong reacted swiftly by redeploying his units from one threatened sector to another. Even if not reaching the same level of fighting as 1972, these multi-divisional attacks pushed the ARVN I Corps defences to their limits.

The PAVN started its campaign on 4 May 1974 by attacking Tien Phuoc, a town some 40km west of Tam Ky, the provincial capital of Quan Tin, in the southern sector of I Corps. Tien Phuoc was a key Regional Force base with outlying positions at Hau Duc and Ky Tra. The attack was carried out by the PAVN 2nd Division, the reorganised and retrained former 711th Division, with the aim of cutting the local Route 533 before capturing the town. The next day, the North Vietnamese took Ky Tra while their artillery was pummelling Tien Phuoc. The ARVN 2nd Division in charge of the sector reacted by sending one battalion each from its 4th Regiment and 6th Regiment to retake the lost position but could not advance much against the PAVN 1st Regiment. Meanwhile, the 31st Regiment of the PAVN 2nd Division

Lieutenant General Ngo Quan Truong was undoubtedly one of the best ARVN commanders and was in charge of the strategic I Corps, bordering North Vietnam. He had stopped the communist offensive at the gates of Hue in 1972 and, by skilfully using his limited available forces, saved the situation again two years later. (ARVN)



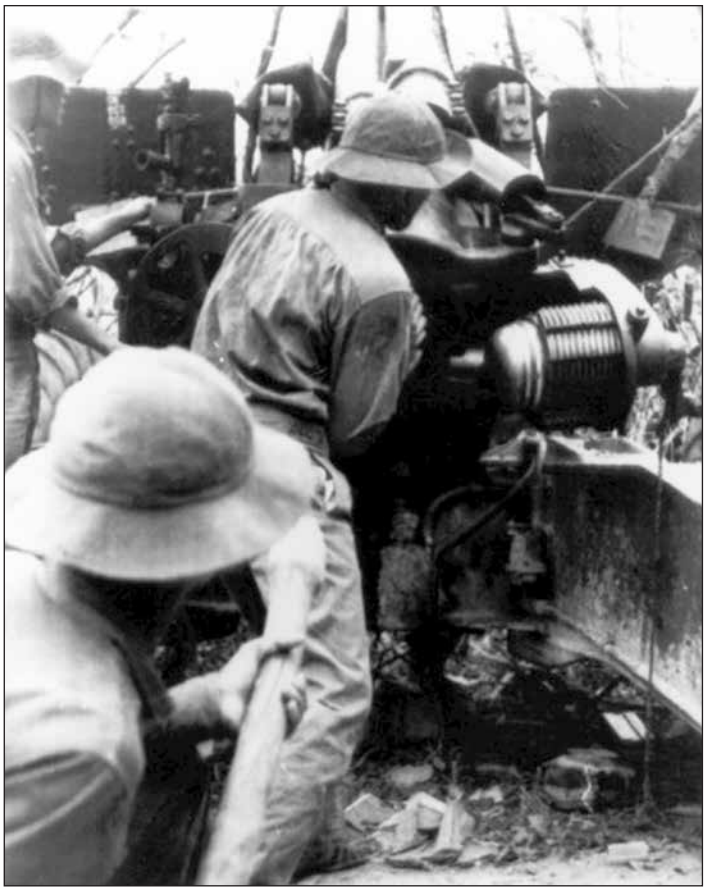
Apart from the flat lands in front of the DMZ, the South Vietnamese held only the coastal area with I Corps, shielded from the Communist controlled zones by a series of fire support bases atop the line of crests of the Annamite Mountains chain west of the coast. The bases were usually reinforced with artillery, such as this battery of M114 155mm howitzers of FSB Baldy. (US Army)

Civilians and RF troops fled Tien Phuoc after that town was attacked in May 1974 by the PAVN 2nd Division, starting a new period of widescale fighting in the ARVN I Corps area. They tried to reach Tam Ky, some 40km east along the local Route 533. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

launched an attack on outposts protecting Tien Phuoc, and one ARVN position held by the RF 131st Battalion was lost. The attacks continued on 16 and 17 May, but two RF battalions at Tien Phuoc repelled the 31st Regiment with heavy losses. The defenders were soon reinforced by the 12th Ranger Group. In early June, that unit was relieved by the 5th Regiment of the ARVN 2nd Division. Finally, the 3rd ARVN Division's 2nd Regiment – supported by the M41s and M113s of the 11th ACS, 18 105mm and six 155mm howitzers, and six M107 175mm SP guns – blasted their way to relieve the siege of Thien Phuoc on 15 July, thereby reopening the route to Tam Ky. To drag the ARVN 2nd Division away from the battlefield, the North Vietnamese launched a series of attacks further south with their 52nd Brigade against the lines of communication and population centres in Quang Ngai Province. Mostly manned by RF and PF militia troops, several outposts were lost. The South Vietnamese counterattacked with the 11th and 14th Ranger Groups, supported by the armour of the 4th ACS. By early July, at the onset of the rainy season, the situation stabilised in the southern I Corps area, the North Vietnamese succeeding only in occupying some isolated mountainous villages.

The PAVN now focused its attention on the central sector of I Corps, southwest of Da Nang, defended by the ARVN 3rd Division. The unit was practically destroyed in 1972 at Quang Tri, but had since been rebuilt under the leadership of Major General Nguyen Duy Hinh, who had recently gained his second star, the only senior South Vietnamese officer to be promoted in 1973. From a defeated and demoralised unit, it turned it into one of the best in the ARVN. It controlled with the territorials all the flatlands of Quang Nam Province up to the hills of Duc Duc District in the southwest and Thuong Duc District in the west. The town of Duc Duc along the Song Thu Bon River was on the fringe on a long-time communist-controlled area that the Americans had called Arizona Territory, now a major operating area for the PAVN 2nd Division. Thuong Duc is in the Song Vu Gia River valley, overlooked by hills on three sides, close to a North Vietnamese logistic corridor. Obviously, the PAVN Military Region 5 that covered the southern Hai Van pass area southwards to the limits of Kontum Province in the Central Highlands – with assets of three divisions, one brigade and several independent regiments, as well as the 574th Armoured Regiment – could no longer tolerate the ARVN incursions from that position into its areas.

The first attempt to reduce these ARVN enclaves was an attack against Duc Duc by the PAVN 36th Regiment, with a second echelon of the entire PAVN 2nd Division and 10th Combat Sapper Battalion, with artillery and tank supports. The first blow fell on Da Trach on 18 July, a position 10km south of Duc Duc, held by Regional troops, a battalion of Rangers and a battalion of the 56th Regiment, 3rd ARVN Division. The initial assault led by 12 T-34/85 tanks was pushed back,



The South Vietnamese positions along the line of crests were regularly harassed by the communist artillery. These North Vietnamese gunners are preparing to fire with a captured M114 howitzer. (PAVN)

The PAVN 2nd Division was entrenched on the heights at the entrance of the Khe Le valley, blunting the counterattacks of the ARVN 3rd Division. The fighting around Duc Duc dragged on until October 1974. These North Vietnamese troops are manning an 82mm mortar. (PAVN)

but after a full day of resistance, the outnumbered South Vietnamese were forced to evacuate their position. The PAVN moved in and deported 7,500 civilians towards their 'liberated zone'. General Hinh reacted by securing the bridge over the Song Thu Bong River, north of Duc Duc, with the 2nd Regiment of the 3rd ARVN Division, and armoured units of the 11th and 20th ACS. These troops then received orders to retake Da Trach and protect Duc Duc. Massive artillery fire, including M107 175mm SP guns, and air strikes stopped the North Vietnamese at the gates of Duc Duc, the North Vietnamese losing six T-34/85s and T-54s. The PAVN then entrenched on the heights at the entrance of the Khe Le valley, with the aim of enticing the South Vietnamese to enter it and destroying the task force piecemeal if it wanted to retake Da Trach. The ARVN 2nd Regiment made great efforts to take the hills on 18 and 19 July, but were unable to advance far, its troops being fired upon by automatic 23mm and 37mm AA guns positioned above them. Fearing a trap, General Hinh stopped the advance and sent forward reconnaissance patrols. He awaited the arrival of the 12th Ranger Group to resume the advance. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese counterattacked on 25 July with the 1st Regiment, 2nd Division, and progressed hill to hill, pushing back the ARVN 2nd Regiment towards Duc Duc. However, after suffering heavy losses, particularly due to the pounding of the VNAF A-37s and F-5s which flew 112 sorties in two days, the PAVN 1st Regiment was replaced by the 38th Regiment, which was now confronted by strong resistance from the 12th Ranger Group. Meanwhile, General Truong had sent the 54th Regiment of the ARVN 1st Division, protecting Hue, as reinforcement. The North Vietnamese then attacked the left flank of the Ranger

The PAVN 2nd Division started its offensive towards the Duc Duc enclave, southwest of Da Nang, on 18 July 1974. The outpost of Da Trach was the first to be taken in an attack by a dozen T-34/85s of the 574th Armoured Regiment. (PAVN)

The crew of an M41 tank of the 20th ACS uses a pause to cook a meal. The unit was deployed to support the ARVN 3rd Division to stem the North Vietnamese advance towards Duc Duc. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

positions with the 36th Regiment, forcing the 21st Ranger Battalion to pull back 1km and dig in on Nui Duong Coi hill with the 38th Ranger Battalion. On 3 August, they were again attacked but inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. Eventually, the 12th Ranger Group was pulled back, replaced in early September by the 54th Regiment, which stabilised the front. However, that unit's stay was short-lived, and it had to return to its parent unit as a serious threat was also now developing around Hue. Its place was taken by the 56th Regiment. The PAVN 2nd Division again attacked in October, well supported by artillery, but the South Vietnamese held their positions despite very heavy losses. The exhausted PAVN 2nd Division could push forward no further.

With the situation at Duc Duc at a standstill, the North Vietnamese tried to bypass the forward defences of Da Nang by attacking north of Route 4 towards Thuong Duc, a small district town deep in the mountains that sits at the head of the Que Son valley, leading directly to Da Nang, held by the 19th Battalion, 14th Ranger Group, and RF/PF units. The VNAF O-1s and O-2s FAC (Forward Air Controller) signalled that a PAVN motorised column of the 29th Regiment, 324B Division, usually operating north of the Hai Van pass, was moving in and called for air strikes. The VNAF F-5s destroyed two dozen trucks, guns and three tanks. But the next day, 31 July, the 29th Regiment arrived and began to pound the town with artillery. Thanks to good artillery and air support, the Rangers held their ground. General Hinh again mounted a rescue operation with a task force comprising the 2nd Regiment of the 3rd Division, the 11th ACS and a troop of Patton tanks of the 1st Armoured Brigade, with the 57th Regiment in a second echelon. However, its advance was laborious, with a series of frontal attacks against hills where the enemy had entrenched themselves. The ARVN M41s and M48s had a series of engagements against the PAVN T-54s and Type 63s of the 574th Armoured Regiment. One of the damaged T-54s was dragged up Lien Kiet hill, where it continued to use its 100mm gun to fire directly against the Rangers entrenched on nearby Hills 381 and 441 covering Thuong Duc. The situation inside the town became unbearable from constant enemy shelling, including long-range 130mm guns. No helicopters could land to pick up the wounded due to the intense anti-aircraft fire. Supplies dropped by parachute by C-130As mostly drifted away and attempts to destroy the bundles resulted in an A-37B being shot down. 37mm anti-aircraft guns positioned on the hills poured in a continuous stream

Several North Vietnamese tanks were destroyed in their attempt to take Duc Duc in July 1974. This T34/85 was knocked out by an ARVN M41. (ARVN)

Troops of the 12th Ranger Group inspect another North Vietnamese T-34/85 destroyed during the fighting for Duc Duc. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

A young soldier of the ARVN 3rd Division gathering hand grenades from a basket for the men of his platoon before another assault in the Duc Duc sector. (ARVN)

of shells against the Rangers' positions. After beating back three enemy assaults, Thuong Duc was finally overwhelmed on 8 August by an attack carried out by the PAVN 31st Regiment and a dozen Type 63 tanks. The ARVN relief task force was a mere 5km away. Overall, the fighting had been ferocious: more than 4,700 South Vietnamese soldiers had been killed or wounded since mid-July. The ARVN 3rd Division had taken 3,500 casualties, about 25% of the unit. General Hinh was subsequently forced to curtail his plan to retake Thuong Duc due to the new ammunition cuts imposed on him, with his division's artillery now limited to 500 shells per day. Fuel, meanwhile, was so scarce that he could no longer commit any armoured units. Even his command helicopter was limited to just four hours of flight time per week.

Facing growing threats against Da Nang, Lieutenant General Truong decided to transfer the responsibility of the Que Son valley from the 3rd Division to the 2nd Division. Leaving the Quang Ngai sector to be guarded by the Regional Forces, its 4th Regiment moved north to assemble near FSB Baldy. But with the withdrawal of the 3rd Division from the sector, replaced by the depleted 12th Ranger Group, the North Vietnamese jumped at the opportunity and seized a dominant hilltop, Hill 1062, around 4km northeast of Thuong Duc. Enemy 130mm artillery was now in range of Da Nang. The commander of I Corps reacted immediately by sending the 1st Airborne Brigade. Furthermore, he pulled out the 3rd Airborne Brigade from the defence of Hue to prepare for movement to Da Nang. Truong ordered the highly regarded Airborne Division commander, Brigadier General Le Quang Luong, to retake Hill 1062. He established his command post at Marble Mountain, south of Da Nang, on 14 August. The arrival of the 'Red Berets' – the nickname of the paratroopers – increased the morale of the South Vietnamese. The elite Airborne's appearance also did not go unnoticed by the North Vietnamese. Senior General Van Tien Dung, the PAVN Chief of the General Staff, recalled the 2nd SAC commander to Hanoi to give him orders personally. He had to hold the position, if possible, all the way through to the spring of 1975, tying the South Vietnamese strategic reserve in position there to enable other areas to conduct their operations.

Despite Dung's admonitions, the paratroopers advanced steadily, fighting their way through the forward enemy defences anchored on the nearby hills that had already blocked the ARVN rescue force for Thuong Duc. It took the 3rd Airborne Brigade a month to reach the base of Hill 1062, which was defended by the PAVN 29th Regiment. Having suffered heavy casualties, that regiment was reinforced, by early September, with the 24th and 66th Regiments, 304th Division. By 2 October, the Red Berets were in possession of the hill and entrenched there. During the following weeks, the paratroopers fought off repeated attempts by the PAVN 304th Division, by skilful use of artillery and air support. In one incident, the PAVN 24th Regiment was allowed to penetrate the defences of Hills 383 and 126 and advanced directly into a killing zone of pre-planned artillery fire, with nearly 250 of the attacking forces being killed. Losses also began to mount for the paratroopers, who were exposed to enemy shelling. On 29 October, the whole 304th Division began another assault, after two days of artillery preparation, including a large concentration of tear gas. This assault carried the highest position on the ridge, forcing the South Vietnamese to withdraw. On 1 November, Hill 1062 was

A PAVN T-54 of the 574th Armoured Regiment advancing towards Thuong Duc, at the head of the Que Son valley and leading directly to Da Nang, on 30 July 1974. (PAVN)

An M48 of the 20th Tank Squadron of the 1st Armoured Brigade rests beside a small outpost in August 1974. The unit had a series of engagements against the PAVN T-54s and Type 63s in the Thuong Duc sector. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

again in the hands of the North Vietnamese, who used two battalions of engineers to build extensive fortifications. General Luong did not give up, though, and pressed on with a new counterattack on 8 November. Three days later, the paratroopers were back on the ridge and established new defensive positions on the slopes. Although heavy fighting continued in the hills for several more weeks, the enemy threat against Da Nang was temporarily thwarted, but at a heavy price. During these three months of fighting, the Airborne Division suffered some 2,500 casualties, including 500 killed. North Vietnamese losses amounted to around 2,000 killed and over 5,000 wounded.

To disperse further the stretched ARVN forces, the North Vietnamese simultaneously increased pressure again in Quang Ngai Province, against the southern part of I Corps. In that area, the PAVN had mustered its 52nd Brigade and five independent battalions, supported by artillery and the 3rd Battalion of the 574th Armoured Regiment. Taking advantage of the local ARVN 2nd Division having been weakened by the departure of its 4th Regiment – sent to the Que Son valley – they attacked and occupied Nghia Hanh, defended by the RF 118th Battalion, on 3 August. Then, on 17 August, the 52nd Brigade moved against Minh Long, weakly defended by two RF companies and 15 platoons of militia, but the first assault failed, with several T-54 and Type 63 tanks destroyed by the VNAF. A rescue force of three ARVN battalions failed to make any headway, nevertheless. The town fell on 23 August after an assault by North Vietnamese infantry mounted on T-54 tanks and K-63 APCs.

The commander of the ARVN 3rd Division, Major General Le Van Nhut, asked I Corps for permission to withdraw the 70th Ranger Battalion from Gia Vut, which was now completely isolated. He also wanted to pull the 68th and 69th Ranger Battalions out of Son Ha and Tra Bong, these units having poor prospects for survival against any enemy armour-led assault. General Truong understood the situation, but he would not agree to abandoning any district towns, following strict order from the Presidency. Artillery fire on Gia Vut began on 19 September, followed shortly by ground assaults. Five outposts fell, but the Rangers moved out quickly and retook three of them. Without artillery or air support – the weather was bad – the 70th Ranger Battalion was unable to hold, and the town fell on 21 September when attacked by T-54 tanks. With the return of its 4th Regiment, the ARVN 3rd Division tried to recover the lost ground south of Nghia Hanh, but the task force could not advance much while the town was under the direct fire of enemy 37mm AA guns positioned on hills less than 5km away. These were finally silenced by accurate artillery fire. In December, the ARVN positions in Quang Ngai Province become more precarious than ever, the advantage and initiative clearly lying in enemy hands.

Throughout the 1974 dry season campaign, the VNAF 1st Air Division provided good air support to stem the North Vietnamese attacks against the ARVN I Corps. This A-37B of the 516th Fighter Squadron at Da Nang is seen during a mission west of Hue. (USAF)

Due to the threat to Da Nang, the ARVN Airborne Division was pulled out of the defence of Hue by mid-August 1974, to be redeployed west of the city. Here, an airborne artillery battery of M102 105mm howitzers pounds communist positions near Thuong Duc. (ARVN)

Fighting around Hill 1062, 4km northeast of Thuong Duc, dragged on for weeks until November 1974. These troops of the PAVN 304th Division are attacking the South Vietnamese paratroopers entrenched on the opposite crests. (PAVN)

Troops of the ARVN Airborne Division in their entrenched positions on Hill 1062 during the autumn of 1974. By their stubborn resistance, they blocked North Vietnamese attempts to position artillery there to shell Da Nang. (ARVN)

The PAVN 52nd Brigade moved against ARVN positions in Quang Ngai Province, in the southern part of I Corps' area, in August 1974. These troops are armed with an RPD light machine gun and AK-47 and SKS rifles. (PAVN)

Meanwhile, the removal of the two airborne brigades from the defence of Hue had left it badly exposed. This sector had already been threatened, between April and June 1974, when the PAVN B4 Front, in the area north of the Hai Van pass, had probed the most important section of the hill country between Hue and the pass, the Bong mountain–Mo Tau hill complex that bordered the strategic coastal Route 1 and Phu Bai, the only important airbase in the northern ARVN I Corps area. The ARVN 1st Division managed to hold on to them in the spring of 1974, losing Hill 144 but later regaining it. Hills 213 and 350 were then lost; Hill 350 was recaptured on 4 June. On 21 June, its 54th Regiment took Hill 273, putting the ARVN in control of all the sector again. But the worsening situation around Da Nang had forced

This Type 63 tank of the PAVN 3rd Battalion of the 574th Armoured Regiment was destroyed by the VNAF during the fighting around Nghia Hanh in August 1974. (ARVN)

The ARVN 1st Division had to hold the defensive lines west of Hue alone in the summer 1974 when the Airborne Division was redeployed to defend Da Nang. It fought a series of battles to hold the area between the city and north of the Hai Van pass. (ARVN)

To compensate for the departure of the Airborne Division in the defence of Hue, the ARVN I Corps further stretched the defensive lines of the Marine Division to bolster the 1st Division. The Marines now covered the northern portion of the city against the PAVN 2nd SAC. The 105mm howitzers of the Marines are shown firing against enemy positions in July 1974. (ARVN)

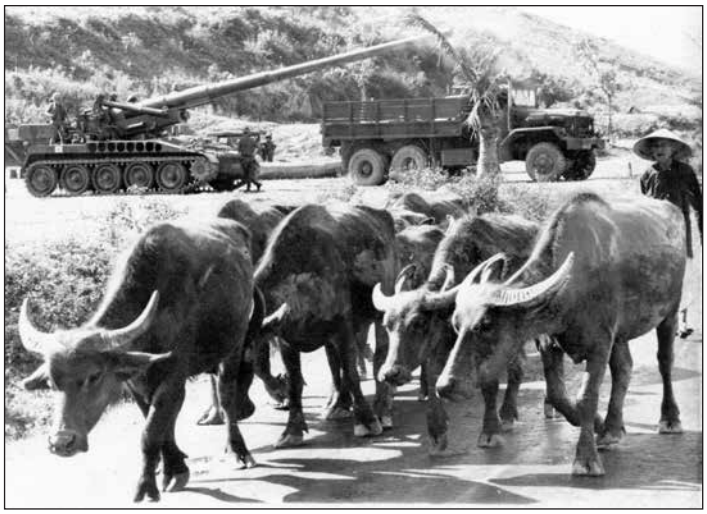
General Truong to transfer elements of the defence of Hue to this sector, as already described. He compensated by stretching further the defensive sector of the Marine Division and creating a mobile task force that could be displaced quickly along Route 1, made up of three troops of tanks – some 54 M48s – with two Marine and one RF battalions mounted on M113s. The depleted Airborne Division retained the responsibility of the Son Bo River approach with the M41s of two cavalry squadrons.

The weakened ARVN disposition led to new communist infiltrations in the coastal zone and the disruption of rail traffic between Hue and Da Nang. The South Vietnamese took their revenge when, on 20 June, one of their patrol boats spotted a North Vietnamese logistics convoy, made up of two landing craft and 30 wooden boats. They were part of the regular logistic runs carried out by the North Vietnamese Navy, delivering goods to the Cua Viet River estuary. Apparently heading too far south, they were strafed by a passing VNAF helicopter. They immediately reversed course, except for one landing craft from the 102nd Boat Company. As it neared the coast, it was fired upon by M41 tanks of the 17th ACS and finally sunk by wire-guided TOW missiles fired from M113s.

Diversionary probes were launched against the 147th Marine Brigade in July, supported by 130mm guns. But when the 56th

A North Vietnamese prisoner being brought back for interrogation by the Marines after a new operation in the Phong Dien sector. (ARVN)

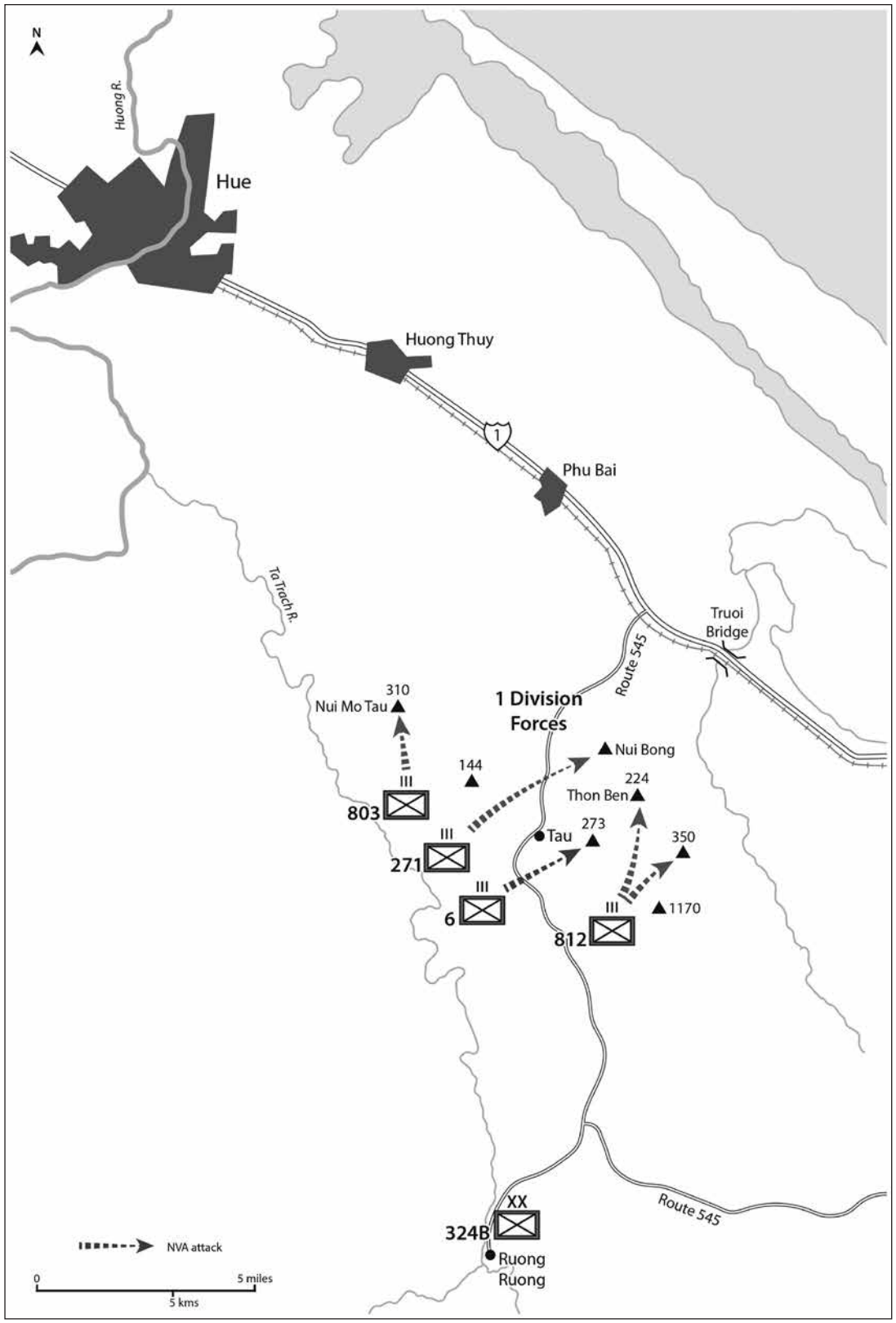
To compensate for the local numerical superiority of the North Vietnamese in the Hue sector, the ARVN I Corps set up a mobile task force that could be displaced quickly along Route 1, made up of the 20th Tank Squadron and two Marine and one RF battalions mounted on M113s. These heavily sandbagged Pattons were on their way to FSB Bastogne. (ARVN)



The ARVN I Corps mobile task force operating like a fire brigade along the coastal Route 1 had a battalion of M107 175mm SP guns attached. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Regiment was transferred to the Duc Duc sector, it left its parent 1st Division with only three regiments to cover a front of 60km. This followed the departure of part of the Airborne Division for Da Nang. It was then that the newly constituted PAVN 2nd SAC (304th, 324B and 325th Divisions) decided to increase pressure against the southern perimeter of Hue. On 28 August, attacks on ARVN positions

in the Nui Ma To–Hill 350 area were begun by the PAVN 271st Independent Regiment and the 812th Regiment, 324B Division. Although the 3rd Regiment of the ARVN 1st Division held its positions, those of the adjacent RF 129th Battalion collapsed. To the east, Nui Bong and Hills 273 and 350 were also taken by the PAVN 6th and 812th Regiments. Meanwhile, the 8th Battalion, 812th Regiment, overran Hill 224. Thus, within only a few hours, all ARVN accomplishments of the long summer campaign south of Hue – apart from Nui Mo Tau – were erased. The PAVN 324B Division now controlled much of the terrain overlooking the Phu Loc lowlands and Phu Bai airbase. Fighting continued throughout the foothills into the first week of September, inflicting heavy losses on the ARVN 3rd Regiment, which had to be replaced by the 51st Regiment, brought back from the Duc Duc front. The operations were now directly commanded by the commander of the ARVN I Corps Forward, Lieutenant General Lam Quang Thi, who sent in as reinforcements the 7th Airborne and 11th RF Battalions. These deployments and the skilful use of artillery concentrations, including M107 175mm SP guns, along the enemy routes of advance put a temporary dampener on the PAVN initiative.



The North Vietnamese attack in the Mo Tau-Bong area in December 1974. (Map by George Anderson)

In an apparent diversion to draw ARVN forces northward from south of Hue, the PAVN strongly attacked the 5th and 8th Marine and the 61st Ranger Battalions holding the Phong Dien sector, north of the Imperial City, on 21 September. Although some 6,600 rounds, including hundreds from long-range M-46 130mm guns and BM-24 240mm heavy rockets, struck the defences, the South Vietnamese held firmly against the PAVN 325th Division ground attacks that followed. General Thi made no deployment in response to the attack. The next week, however, renewed assaults by the PAVN 503rd Regiment reached Nui Mo Tau, and by the end of September 1974, the 324B Division had consolidated its control over the high ground south of Phu Bai, from Nui Mo Tau east to Nui Bong and Hill 350.

The PAVN 2nd SAC immediately exploited this advantage by moving 85mm field gun batteries of the 78th Artillery Regiment to fire on Phu Bai airbase, which forced the VNAF and Air Vietnam to suspend its use. The offensive to retake the lost positions began on 22 October with a diversionary assault on Hills 224 and 303. The ARVN 1st Regiment was to follow with the main attack against the PAVN 803rd Regiment on Nui Mo Tau. However, the area was then hit by typhoon Della, which reduced the advance to a crawl. Nevertheless, the attack on Nui Mo Tau, with a secondary effort against elements of

In September 1974, the PAVN 324B Division consolidated its control over the high ground south of Phu Bai. It positioned 85mm field guns of the 78th Artillery Regiment there to fire on Phu Bai airbase. It was only on 13 December that the ARVN could recover the crests and reopen Hue's airport to traffic. (PAVN)

the 812th Regiment on Nui Bong, began on 26 October. The ARVN 54th Regiment, with the 2nd and 3rd Battalions attached, made slight progress on Nui Mo Tau, but the 3rd Battalion, 1st Regiment, met strong resistance near Nui Bong. The ARVN artillery was taking its toll of the North Vietnamese defenders, though, in addition to the cold rain that swamped their trenches. Towards the end of October, the PAVN 803rd and 812th Regiments were so depleted that the 2nd SAC withdrew them and assigned the defence of Nui Mo Tau and Nui Bong to the 6th and 271st Regiments respectively. As heavy rains continued and fire support became increasingly difficult, the ARVN thrust slowed considerably. The ARVN 1st Division's units around Nui Bong also suffered daily casualties to North Vietnamese artillery. On 24 November, Major General Nguyen Van Diem, commanding 1st Division, secured permission to pull troops away from Nui Bong and concentrate his forces against Nui Mo Tau.

For the assault of the Nui Mo Tau position, General Truong authorised the reinforcement of the 54th Regiment by the 15th Ranger Group, drawn out of the Bo River valley west of Hue, which would make the main attack. Its commander selected his 3rd Battalion to lead, followed by the 2nd Battalion and the 94th Ranger Battalion. When the 3rd Battalion had difficulty reaching its attack position, it was replaced by the 1st Battalion on 27 November. The weather was terrible that day, but two Ranger battalions made some progress on the eastern and south-eastern slopes of the mountain. On 28 November, with finally good weather and long-awaited support from the VNAF, the 1st Battalion began moving towards the crest. On top of it, enemy forces were approaching a desperate state; one battalion of the PAVN 5th Regiment was moving to reinforce them, but the washout of routes eliminated its resupply.

Despite difficulties, however, the enemy continued to resist strongly on both mountains. On 1 December, Colonel Vo Toan, the highly respected commander of the ARVN 1st Regiment, returned from a six-month absence at South Vietnam's Command and General Staff College. His timely arrival was probably responsible for injecting new spirit and more professional leadership into an attack that had bogged down so close to its objective. But help also arrived for the defenders; the refitted and recovered PAVN 812th Regiment replaced the badly battered 6th Regiment on Nui Mo Tau. Over on Nui Bong, however, the remnants of the PAVN 271st Regiment received no help. On 3 December, the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the ARVN 1st Regiment assaulted a North Vietnamese battalion dug-in only 50m from the crest but intense fire drove the South Vietnamese back, although the 1st Regiment retained a foothold on the slopes. The attack by the 54th Regiment and 15th Ranger Group had more success. On 10 December, they took one of the twin crests of Nui Mo Tau, capturing the other the following day. As bloody skirmishing continued around the mountain for weeks, the PAVN executed another relief, replacing the 812th Regiment with the 803rd. Although the enemy remained entrenched on Nui Bong, their resupply was difficult. Furthermore, the PAVN 78th Artillery Regiment was forced to remove its batteries for the same reason. The VNAF, meanwhile, resumed military traffic at Phu Bai on 13 December. By New Year's Eve, North Vietnamese pressure south of Hue had been slackened, even if the ARVN had to conduct regular aggressive sweeps to put the city out of their artillery range.

Little publicised at that time, Lieutenant General Ngo Quan Truong again saved I Corps by making timely and appropriate economy-of-force deployments, taking great risks, weakening one sector for another that was threatened and stabilising the situation. This was obtained at a high cost, however, with some 15,000 casualties. Although the ARVN I Corps had stymied the PAVN attacks, ultimately, in Truong's opinion, it was the Airborne Division that saved Da Nang, and the people knew it. Truong also moved the Marine Division from Quang Tri Province to face the threat around Hue, assigning the 15th Ranger Group and the 1st Armoured Brigade to take over the Marines' positions. It was a move that he would partially duplicate in March 1975. While it worked this time, it would prove disastrous in 1975. This was exacerbated when Saigon withdrew the Red Berets from I Corps, and the population panicked.

Truong understood that while he had prevailed this time, it was the maximum he could do without additional assets. Throughout the 1974 campaign, he intensely scrutinised the enemy to see if they would commit their Central Reserve divisions in North Vietnam, which would drastically change the situation. It was a fear that would materialise a year later, with catastrophic consequences.

6
EXPANDING THE LIBERATED AREAS

In the rest of South Vietnam, the North Vietnamese continued to expand their logistic corridors and bases, eliminating any isolated Saigon government enclaves behind their lines. That was particularly significant in the Central Highlands sector. This area, covered by the ARVN II Corps and the PAVN B3 Front, was the scene of heavy divisional fighting when the communists opened their new routes in 1973. The level of combat markedly diminished during the dry season of 1974 since most of the PAVN logistical preparations were completed. Three isolated outposts remained in the mountains north and northeast of the city of Kontum. Astride Route 14 in the north-western tip of Kontum Province was Dak Pek, occupied by the depleted 88th Ranger Battalion and 10 platoons of militia. About 3,200 civilians, nearly all Montagnards, also lived there, and the place could be resupplied only by air. On 12 May 1974, the position was attacked by the 29th Regiment of the PAVN 324B Division, trucked-in 120km south from its base in the A Shau valley. It was supported by 31 105mm and 122mm howitzers and MRLs (multiple rocket launchers), as well as 10 T-54s of the 6th Company of the 273rd Armoured Regiment. The defenders were able to hold the enemy infantry at bay until the morning of 16 May. Throughout the night, the base was heavily shelled, while bulldozers opened a new track for the tanks through the jungle that ended 3km from the entrance to the base. The VNAF tried to support by flying 70 sorties, despite intense 37mm anti-aircraft fire, claiming at least one tank. The T-54s surged forwards after an artillery barrage of 7,000 rounds, firing at point-blank range against the Rangers' bunkers. At noon, all contact was lost with the base.

On 27 May, it was the turn of the Tieu Atar outpost, north of Ban Me Thuot, the capital of Darlac Province. Positioned close to the Cambodian border, the RF 211th Battalion posed a threat to North Vietnamese lines of communication south of Duc Co. The base was overrun before noon.

Installed atop a hill about 1,300m above the Dak Nghe River, Mang Buk was over 50km north of Kontum city and about 30km north of Chuong Nghia (Plateau Gi), and was garrisoned by an RF Battalion. It had no real capability to interfere with a communist logistics route that passed south of it. The PAVN began its siege on 25 July by occasionally shelling it with mortars and 107mm rockets. On 18 August, the 66th Regiment of the PAVN 10th Division attacked and took the camp. No air support could be provided due to poor weather.

The next target was the Plei Me outpost, a well-fortified position midway between Pleiku city and the fallen outpost of Tieu Atar, which was defended by the 82nd Ranger Battalion, which in April had been ejected from FSB 711. By early August, FSB 711 – an artillery base north of Plei Me – was back in ARVN hands and able to support the defence of Plei Me. By early June, the PAVN 320th Division left its base around Duc Co and began to assemble around Plei Me, deploying its 48th Regiment, elements of the 64th Regiment as well as an artillery and an anti-aircraft battalion. The ARVN II Corps reacted by reinforcing FSB 711 with the 42nd Regiment, 22nd Division, and striking enemy assembly areas with artillery and air attacks. The 320th Division delayed its attack, but kept elements of its 48th Regiment near Plei Me. When the ARVN II Corps moved the 42nd Regiment back to Binh Dinh Province, the PAVN B3 Front saw an opportunity for a long-awaited assault on Plei Me. The 82nd Ranger Battalion was reinforced by a company from the 81st Ranger Battalion, and although its main defence was inside Plei Me camp itself, it also had troops deployed on nearby Chu Ho hill and Hill 509. The PAVN 320th Division employed at least four infantry battalions from its 9th and 48th Regiments, plus the 26th Independent Regiment of the B3 Front and later a battalion of its 64th Regiment, against the 410 men of the Rangers and the fire bases and relief columns supporting them. Artillery support included at least a battery of M-46 130mm guns and a battery of 120mm mortars, as well as 85mm field guns, 82mm mortars and recoilless rifles.

The attack was launched on 4 August, the Rangers vacating their bunkers bombarded by 120mm heavy mortars with delay-fused projectiles and fighting from their spider-web pattern of trenches. Unlike Dak Pek and Tieu Atar, Plei Me was supported by artillery from outside the area under attack. The ARVN batteries of 105mm and 155mm howitzers at FSB 711 provided excellent support. Additional artillery at Phu Nhon helped on the southern and eastern approaches, and M107 175mm SP guns covered the entire perimeter. The VNAF also provided good air support, including night protection with its AC-119 gunships. The commander of the 82nd Ranger Battalion and his deputy called and adjusted all fire missions, restricting radio traffic

The isolated Tieu Atar outpost, north of Ban Me Thuot and held by the ARVN RF 211th Battalion, was overrun on 27 May 1974 by the North Vietnamese. All South Vietnamese outposts remaining behind the communist-occupied areas in the Central Highlands were eliminated by the year's end. (ARVN)

to themselves. Six days after the attack began, the outpost of Chu Ho fell, followed five days later by Hill 509, but the main camp held out. On 2 September, after a 29-day siege, the PAVN 320th Division withdrew from the bloody battlefield of Plei Me. It had launched 20 ground assaults, firing over 10,000 artillery rounds. The Rangers recovered at least 350 abandoned bodies. The defensive success boosted the flagging morale of the South Vietnamese, with the battle lavishly reported by the press.

With this setback, the PAVN B3 Front transferred its attention towards the northern sector of the ARVN II Corps, concentrating against the last outposts around Kontum city. The town was defended by most of the 23rd Division: its 45th Regiment defended the northeast approaches, whilst the attached 40th Regiment, 22nd Division, covered the north-western sector, with 44th Regiment in reserve behind. Three RF battalions manned the northern and western approaches, while a fourth RF battalion and two Ranger battalions secured the southern reaches. The ARVN II Corps tried every means possible to slow down the building by the North Vietnamese of Route 715, a new logistic corridor bypassing Kontum to the east, linking the Ho Chi Minh Trail towards the coastal Binh Dinh Province. Long-range reconnaissance patrols were sent against the road to lay mines and sabotage trucks and road-building equipment, and air strikes were called in. Four 175mm guns in Kontum, with their fire adjusted by the VNAF O-1s, also interdicted Route 715. Persistent attacks caused high casualties among PAVN work parties and temporarily stopped further extension of the road.

With Mang Buk overrun, the PAVN B3 Front conducted attacks along the Kontum defences that tied the meagre II Corps reserves in place. Outposts Number 4 and Number 5, 15km north of the city along Route 5B, were taken by the enemy. While the survivors of Mang Buk poured into Chuong Nghia, the enemy was not far behind. The position was reinforced with the RF 254th Battalion, bringing its garrison to 600 men, supported by two 105mm howitzers. About 2,500 civilians lived within the camp's perimeter. Outer defensive positions were built on a series of outposts on two concentric rings. Chuong Nghia was attacked on 30 September: by 2 October, despite air support, five outposts had fallen. Two M107 175mm SP guns were moving in along the local Route 58 from Kontum, but the poor condition of the road made the going very slow. The RF 251st Battalion were loaded on UH-1H helicopters at Pleiku, ready to fly in as reinforcement, but the operation was cancelled when the selected landing zone was constantly under enemy artillery fire while the two M107s were still not yet in range. The next day, the PAVN 28th Regiment took the last major outpost in Kontum Province.

The PAVN B2 Front carried out only limited, low-scale operations against the ARVN IV Corps during its 'strategic raids' campaign. But from 6–26 December 1974, North Vietnamese forces in the Mekong Delta conducted the most widespread and intense attacks thus far in the war. They meanwhile consolidated independent battalions and regiments into larger formations more suited to sustained conventional

Troops of the PAVN 320th Division move against the Plei Me outpost, south of Pleiku, held by the ARVN 82nd Ranger Battalion. This platoon is supported by a B-10 82mm recoilless gun. On 2 September 1974, after a 29-day siege, the communists were forced to withdraw. (PAVN)

Contrary to the previous dry season offensive, the PAVN 273rd Armoured Regiment, attached to the B3 Front, was used only sparingly during the 1974 dry season operations, including its T-54s here at Dak Pek in May. Meanwhile, the unit was expanded into practically a brigade-strength unit. (PAVN)

These North Vietnamese artillerymen are preparing a Chinese-built Type 63 MRL, firing 12 107mm rockets, for use against an ARVN outpost in the Central Highlands. (PAVN)

These M41 tanks of the 19th ACS of the ARVN 2nd Armoured Brigade are advancing towards the besieged Plei Me outpost to lift the siege. (ARVN)

The PAVN 273rd Armoured Regiment had a small number of BTR-152 APCs, like this BTR-152A, armed with a twin ZPU-2 14.5mm heavy machine gun. It is engaging an ARVN Ranger outpost north of Kontum. (PAVN)

combat: in late 1974, the PAVN organised the 4th Division in Chuong Thien Province and the 5th Division in Kien Tuong and Dinh Tuong Provinces. On its side, the new ARVN IV Corps commander, the austere Major General Nguyen Khoa Nam, also restructured his forces by reshuffling the decaying Regional Forces. For years, they continued to deteriorate in terms of efficacy, with a high desertion rate, forcing them to be redeployed in pacification tasks with regular units. General Nam wanted to recover the corps' divisions for mobile operations and regroup and strengthen the RF units, particularly in the southern part of the Delta. Nam deactivated 16 RF battalions, five RF companies and 76 PF platoons to fill the ranks of the other depleted territorial units. He also decided to reduce the number of indefensible, isolated RF outposts and to consolidate combat power in larger positions. Sixty-three posts were abandoned under this plan. Touring every sector, sanctioning defective officers and promoting those who proved themselves in the field, Nam instilled a new spirit throughout the Delta, improving Saigon's control of the area. He was able, despite drastic cuts – including in riverine units – to retain control of practically all the main cities and axes of communications within his region until the fall of South Vietnam.

The communists struck with greatest force in the Elephant's Foot area of Kien Tuong Province, but strong attacks also occurred along lines of communications in Dinh Tuong, Chuong Thien, Ba Xuyen, Vinh Binh, Vinh Long and An Xuyen Provinces. Losses on both sides were heavy; the ARVN had over 3,000 casualties, including 500 killed, while PAVN losses amounted to over 3,500. Despite the generally effective defence put up by the ARVN, security in the hamlets and countryside of the southern Delta deteriorated as a result of widespread attacks against isolated, lightly defended regions.

The B2 Front prolonged its operations into 1975, part of its new dry-season campaign, aiming to isolate the Mekong Delta from Saigon's control. The PAVN 5th Division launched a series of attacks against outposts in the Dinh Tuong, Tri Phap and Kien Tuong Provinces. RF units and the ARVN 7th Division counterattacked along the Cambodia–Svay Rieng border. By the end of January, only two ARVN positions remained in the Tuyen Binh District: Long Khot outpost was overrun by elements of the PAVN 6th and 174th Regiments using captured M113s. But capturing that outpost was the last significant success the PAVN would enjoy in Kien Tuong before the final offensive. Toward the end of February, the PAVN 5th Division withdrew the battered 6th Regiment from action and sent it into Cambodia for reorganisation. The ARVN 7th Division kept up the pressure against the 174th Regiment around Moc Hoa. Overall, the PAVN 5th Division took almost 1,000 casualties. Over on the western edge of the Delta, north of Rach Gia District town, ARVN regulars intercepted two PAVN battalions moving down Infiltration Corridor I-C and inflicted heavy casualties: more than 350 were killed. By early January 1975, some 57 ARVN outposts had been overrun or evacuated under pressure. Of these, ARVN counterattacks regained 24. The heaviest losses were in the far south, in Bac Lieu, where 23 posts were lost and only four retaken, and in An Xuyen, where 16 posts fell and just two were recovered. In the key central province of Chuong Thien, the ARVN countered successfully the 2nd, 19B and 95A Regiments of

Troops of the ARVN 7th Division crossing a canal over a destroyed bridge near Moc Hoa in January 1975. Much infrastructure was destroyed during the widespread attacks carried out by the North Vietnamese in the Mekong Delta area in December 1974. (ARVN)

The Mekong Delta and Binh Dinh Province were the two areas where Viet Cong activities remained the strongest in South Vietnam during this last phase of the war. These guerrillas, including a female fighter armed with a captured M16 rifle in the foreground, are scrounging a just-conquered PF outpost, in search of useful equipment. (PAVN)

the PAVN 4th Division. Only six outposts were lost to enemy attacks, and four were recaptured. A further unexpected security problem for the ARVN IV Corps was the arrival of Cambodian troops and refugees in Chau Doc Province after the collapse of Cambodian positions on the other side of border under renewed North Vietnamese attacks.

7
THE NORTH VIETNAMESE DECISION TO CONQUER SOUTH VIETNAM

In July 1974, North Vietnam's Communist Party general secretary Le Duan convened a meeting with PAVN senior officers to review the current military operations and their future development. He was briefed by the commander of the Central Cell, Lieutenant General Hoang Van Thai, that despite the tough ongoing operations, the ARVN forces were experiencing more and more difficulties due to drastic US aid cutbacks. Le Duan concluded that it was a now-or-never opportunity to grasp that "narrow window of opportunity" to win the war. Consequently, he ordered Thai to draft a "strategic plan in such a way to create a strategic opportunity and be prepared to immediately exploit that strategic opportunity". That opportunity could be a political breakdown of the Saigon regime, for example after a new coup d'état, or a decisive PAVN victory on a specific battlefield. On that occasion, the local commanders had to act decisively, managing to secure departure positions to allow the whole PAVN regular battle corps to be engaged for the critical offensive. Both the Politburo and General Headquarters had to act fast before Washington could intervene. Le Duan also feared that both his Soviet and Chinese mentors would restrain him by imposing a last-minute negotiated political settlement.

In fact, since May, General Thai had refined his planning with these exterior constraints in mind. As already described, both Moscow and Beijing, within the cadre of the new détente policy with the United States, had decided to curb their North Vietnamese protégé's ambitions and preferred to maintain the status quo. Although they had restored PAVN combat strength to the level prior to the Easter Offensive of 1972, they did not allow its expansion, notably of its armoured force as required by Hanoi. Worse, they also decided to limit their delivery of ammunition for tanks and artillery, thereby limiting any North Vietnamese wide-scale offensive to conquer the South. During the 1972 campaign, the PAVN fired around 220,000 artillery shells of over 85mm calibre, including 150,000 shells just for the battle at Quang Tri. With just 100,000 shells now in their stocks, Thai had to calculate carefully any future engagement. He also ordered many artillery regiments to replace their current equipment with the obsolete ZIS-3 76.2mm field guns that were maintained in reserve, for which they had adequate ammunition. Other units were given US-

Senior General Vo Nguyen Giap, fifth from the left, presiding over a working session of the Central Military Commission at the end of 1974 during the extended discussions with the Politburo to finalise the different options to conquer South Vietnam. On his left is the PAVN Chief of Staff, Colonel General Phung The Tai. (PAVN)

Due to restraints on the delivery of heavy artillery ammunition by both China and the Soviet Union, the PAVN was forced to issue obsolete ZIS-3 76.2mm guns, for which there were enough shells, to the divisional artillery units. (PAVN)

Many divisional artillery units were also issued US-built 105mm howitzers. For the coming campaign, they would soon be bolstered by those captured from the ARVN. (PAVN)

built 105mm howitzers, also taken out of storage. In service since the war against the French, these pieces were of various origins; some had been captured from the enemy, but the majority had been delivered by China, from its stocks from former Nationalist KMT units at the end of the Chinese Civil War. The advantage in doing so was that the PAVN artillerymen could now recycle captured South Vietnamese artillery shells.

In July, lengthy discussions took place at the CMC under the supervision of General Giap, who outlined the main points of the coming campaign. Finally, on 26 August, the Central Cell revealed to Le Duan the seventh draft of the plan to conquer South Vietnam. The plan would have two stages: 1975 would be Stage One, a surprise attack to weaken the enemy, followed by Stage Two in 1976, when total victory would be achieved. Phase One of Stage One was a limited offensive of the B2 Front that would last from December 1974 to February 1975. Phase Two, the heart of the 1975 campaign, would begin in March. A multi-divisional assault would target Duc Lap in Quan Duc Province in the southern portion of the Central Highlands. That area was chosen because it was considered the weakest point in South Vietnam's defence. The areas held by the ARVN I Corps in the north and III Corps around Saigon were heavily defended. In the vast forests and mountains of the Central Highlands, the ARVN forces were concentrated in the northern section, defending the main cities of Pleiku and Kontum. Moreover, capturing the southern part of the Highlands would enable the PAVN to connect the B3 Front (in the western Central Highlands) with the B2 Front, providing easier supply lines and linking up the 'liberated' areas. Phase Two would be supported by diversionary operations against the ARVN III Corps in the lowlands of central South Vietnam and the northern portion of I Corps. Phase Three, from August–October 1975, would consist of further attacks in central Vietnam and against I Corps. For Phase One, Giap assigned only 10% of the artillery ammunition, then 45% for Phase Two.

The new plan was a larger version of the 1973 and 1974 dry-season attacks and was a countrywide offensive – a series of actions intended to inflict casualties rather than occupy territory – not a complete offensive that aimed to capture ground and ultimately lead to the fall of the South Vietnam government. The goals for 1975 were to destroy a significant portion of the ARVN – if possible, a great part of an entire army corps – defeat its pacification efforts and furthermore cripple the South Vietnam economy. The PAVN was required to extend the logistic network from Route 14 all the way to the Mekong Delta. These goals had the same purpose: to wear down South Vietnamese resistance and create conditions for the appearance of a "strategic opportunity". The Politburo met on 30 September to hear the latest strategic plan. Maps and charts covered the walls of the conference room as Generals Hoan Van Thai and Le Trong Tan briefed the North Vietnamese leaders. Thai provided a balanced overview and warned that despite the fact that the South Vietnamese were weakening fast, their armed forces remained powerful. He also indicated that the PAVN was still experiencing difficulties in large combined-arms operations and with the still-persistent weakness of the local Viet Cong forces. Giap reminded everyone not to take the enemy lightly due to the heavy losses it inflicted on the PAVN during the previous dry-season campaign. He stated that while the intention was that victory should be achieved in 1976, that could be extended to early 1977 if the enemy resistance was stronger than expected. While everybody agreed on the overall attack concept, there was a simple but major unanswered question: would the Americans send troops back into South Vietnam if Saigon was in danger of falling? It was felt that the US would not, but air and naval bombardment was believed to still be a danger. The group remained wary and deeply fearful of the American air power that had devastated North Vietnam in 1972. Before making a final decision, they wanted additional time to study the plan. The Politburo decided to hold an expanded meeting in December that would include the commanders of the southern battlefields. Regardless, orders went out to the various fronts in South Vietnam to start preparations based on the new plan. On the diplomatic front, Hanoi announced that the Provisional Revolutionary Government would no longer negotiate with Nguyen Van Thieu. It called on all "progressive" elements to work in concert to overthrow Thieu and "implement the Paris Agreement", the code-name for a coalition government. It was a dramatic political offer: a solution to the South Vietnam problem through negotiations, but only if Thieu was removed.

The President of South Vietnam was an exhausted man. He was facing increased opposition to his rule, the economy was crumbling and the piaster currency was nearly worthless. Once again, his country survived a new enemy dry-season offensive. Apart from Saigon losing Thuong Duc and a series of minor outposts, the Communists had not significantly altered the balance of forces. The South Vietnamese armed forces were still standing, but they were slowly bleeding to death without any prospects of the resumption of American aid. Since the 'ceasefire' in January 1973, the South Vietnamese had lost 59,120 men, a rather bloody two years of 'peace', especially if compared to

By January 1975, the now-isolated South Vietnam continued to fight for its survival despite the drastic cut in US aid. Its armed forces had suffered over 59,000 dead since the signing of the Paris Peace Accords two years earlier. A Buddhist priest here presides over the burial of a soldier at the ARVN National Military Cemetery of Bien Hoa. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

the 58,220 US casualties during their 10-year involvement. Thieu wondered if his stated strategy to not abandon a single piece of land to the enemy was the wisest course of action in view of the new circumstances.

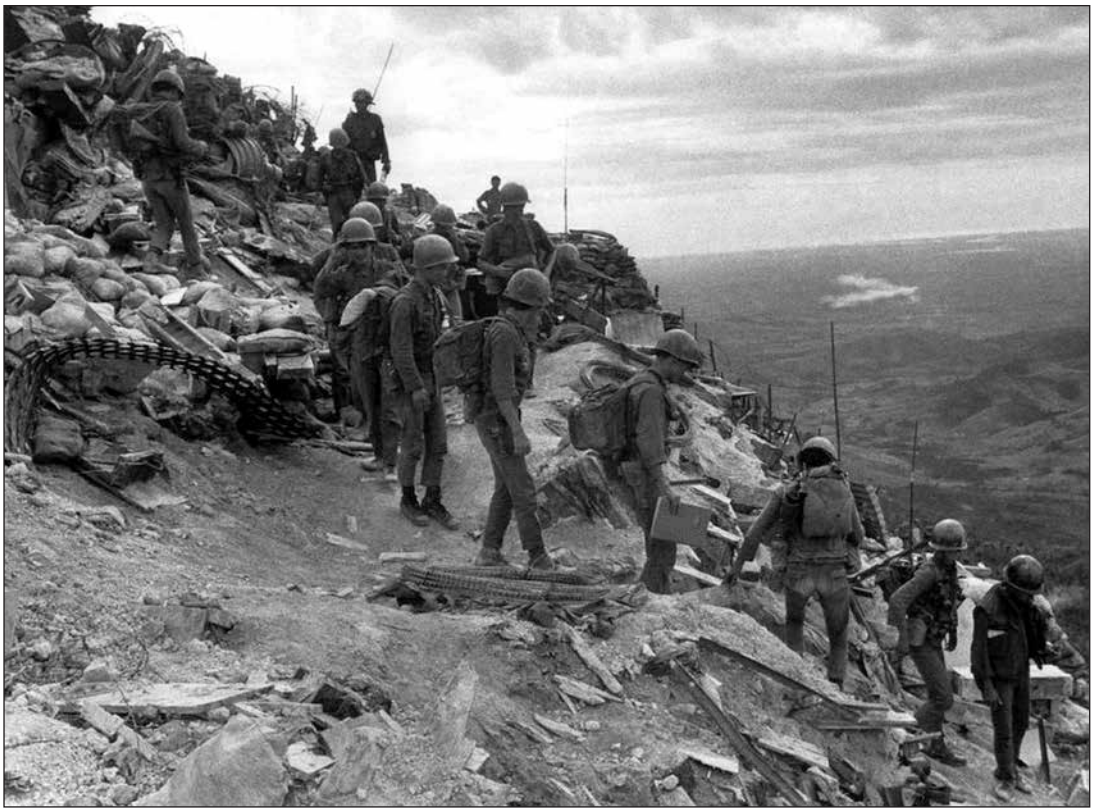
A last test at Phuoc Long

The commander of the B2 Front, Lieutenant General Tran Van Tra, had meanwhile prepared its 1974–75 dry-season offensive. At the head of the most important operational command, covering the southern half of South Vietnam, he consistently requested from the PAVN General Headquarters all the necessary means for an eventual direct assault against Saigon. He had already prepared such a plan, a multi-direction attack with a five-column force, back in 1964, prior to the direct intervention of US ground forces in Vietnam. He had led the assault against the capital during the 1968 Tet Offensive that ended in disaster. With his Political Commissar, Pham Hung, he finalised a bold plan for the coming campaign. In Phase One, lasting from December 1974 to February 1975, his forces would attack to achieve three territorial goals. First, they would capture the portion of Route 14 running north from the remote province of Phuoc Long on the Cambodian border to Quang Duc Province. This would match the General Headquarters aim of linking the B3 to the B2 Fronts. Second, they would seize two rich rice-growing districts in Binh Thuy Province northeast of Saigon. Thirdly, in Phase Two, beginning in March and going on until the end of May 1975, he aimed at a large section of Tay Ninh and Binh Long Provinces northwest of Saigon. As in the previous 'strategic raids' campaign, he again envisaged to continue the attack in a Third Phase during the rainy season. He still passionately believed in his concept, choosing these areas as 'springboard' positions for the ultimate attack against Saigon.

Phuoc Long was the primary target in Phase One, and the district seat of Dong Xoai was the key to capturing the province. The town controlled an important road junction where Route 14 ended. Northwards, the highway connected Phuoc Long to Quang Duc Provinces and went on to Ban Me Thuot, the capital of Darlac Province in the southern portion of the Central Highlands. Phuoc Long Province was actually far outside the defences of Saigon, its importance to South Vietnam being essentially political in that the government could still claim possession off all provincial capitals. On the other hand, the South Vietnamese presence so deep inside enemy-controlled territory posed a threat to the huge PAVN Bo Duc–Bu Dop logistic complex. Furthermore, the B2 Front's 26th Armoured Group was stationed at the Bu Dop airfield only 25km from the ARVN base at Song Be. The COSVN (Central Office for South Vietnam) Engineer Command had its headquarters at Bo Duc and kept several battalions working on roads between Loc Ninh and Bu Gia Map to the northeast. Anti-aircraft artillery battalions, transportation battalions, training centres and rear-area service organisations contributed to a relatively dense PAVN presence, almost within medium artillery range of Phuoc Binh, the capital of Phuoc Long Province. Additionally, four major PAVN infiltration-supply routes traversed Phuoc Long Province from north to south, past ARVN bases, and crossed sections of Route 14 patrolled by South Vietnamese troops. The PAVN 7th Division, however, had for some time permanently blocked Route 14 between Bu Na and Don Luan, causing traffic to the provincial capital to detour through Quang Duc Province. Because the PAVN 7th Division also cut Route 1A south of Don Luan, that town relied exclusively on helicopter resupply. North Vietnamese interdiction of Route 14 east of Phuoc Binh–Song Be was often enough to require the ARVN to mount road-clearing operations each time a major rice or military convoy was scheduled to roll into Phuoc Long. The province required about 500 tons of rice per month, so frequent convoys were necessary, while the local ARVN forces kept enough ammunition on hand to last for a week of intensive combat, and these stocks also had to be replenished frequently. The road convoys were supplemented by the VNAF C-47 and C-130A transports using the airstrip at Song Be.

Thus, taking Dong Xoai would isolate Phuoc Binh, the provincial capital of Phuoc Long, and open Route 14 for the requested additional divisions to reinforce B2 Front. General Tra planned to commit elements of two divisions and his remaining armour and heavy artillery to capture Dong Xoai. Both Tra and Hung arrived at Hanoi in late November, like the other fronts' commanders, to attend the expanded military conference. In the course of briefing the General Staff on their offensive, both were shocked to learn that during their journey, Giap had cancelled their dry-season plan. He had ordered B2 Front to refrain from attacking Dong Xoai and had forbidden it to use its tanks and heavy artillery. Instead, B2 Front was ordered to seize two small towns on Route 14 north of Dong Xoai, Bu Dang

and Bu Na, in preparation for the national Phase 2 offensive towards Duc Lap. This lesser thrust would support the main offensive in the southern Central Highlands. Otherwise, B2 Front should concentrate on the Mekong Delta and husband its forces for 1976. Giap, as well as the PAVN commander-in-chief, Senior General Van Tien Dung, reined in Tra because they did not want major attacks in other sectors tipping off the South Vietnamese to the overall strategy. Giap's Phase One was limited in scope, mostly for the purpose of surprise and diversion. Giap also needed to economise on the expenditure of equipment and ammunition for the main Phase Two attack. In fact, Giap was becoming sceptical of Tra's ability to conduct successfully what had been planned in view of the results of his previous summer-season offensive in the Iron Triangle, supported by tanks and heavy artillery, which had badly failed. The 9th Division had incurred very heavy casualties and Tra had drained his stores of artillery rounds. The other divisional battles in Binh Duong, Tay Ninh and Bien Hoa Provinces had produced thousands of additional casualties, and apart from positions on the Tay Ninh–Cambodian frontier, all other gains were retaken by the ARVN. Giap was afraid that if Tra attacked Dong Xoai, which seemed a more difficult target than Rach Bap in the Iron Triangle, Tra would again fail and expend even more precious artillery rounds. In addition, the ammunition supplies were even more scarce in the northern part of South Vietnam, the battle for Thuong Duc vin bled the PAVN coffers in that region. That made Tra's request sound not only parochial but ludicrous. Moreover, the Central Cell, led by Hoang Van Thai, was disdainful of Tra's military stratagems. The disaster of the 1968 Tet Offensive against Saigon had also soured the General Staff towards Tra's advice, and his failure in 1972 to seize An Loc had hardened that attitude. Furthermore, it was difficult to reconcile Tra's claim that the ARVN had dramatically weakened with the fact that his forces had taken heavy casualties in the Iron Triangle while seizing little terrain.



The RF 314th Battalion sustained for a month repeated assaults by elements of the PAVN 303rd Division on Ba Den (Black Virgin), a mountain rising out of the plain near Tay Ninh city northwest of Saigon. Without replenishments and lacking ammunition, the defenders evacuated the position on 6 January 1975. (ARVN)

Despite the opposition of Giap and the General Headquarters, Tra was not without influential supporters and he then decided to go over their heads. On 5 December, along with Pham Hung, he met with Le Duan for dinner. After discussing the situation in his theatre, Tra came right to the point: "Why did you instruct us not to attack Dong Xoai?" Le Duan said that the General Staff told him that Tra was going to use his main-force units right from the start of the offensive. He would be better-served fighting in such a way to conserve his strength. Hung and Tra argued that was not the case, and again laid out their plan. The aggressive Tra needed little to convince Le Duan to accept his plan. In a key turning point of the war, the secretary general agreed to Tra's plan, but he also issued a stern warning: "You must be certain of victory and not use large forces." In fact, during the wider Politburo military conference of 18 December, the attack against Phuoc Long was already ongoing; the North Vietnamese leaders, after heated debates, accepted the revised plan of the Central Cell that included General Tra's propositions for Phuoc Long. The main point revolved around what the US reaction would be if the North Vietnamese took a South Vietnam provincial capital for the first time since the Paris Peace Accords. That would be an ultimate test that would see if Washington would send back the B-52 bombers. Although the Politburo members agreed that the possibility was very remote, many remained uneasy.

Just after receiving the green light from Le Duan, Tra cabled his headquarters to be ready to implement the attack against Dong Xoai. But that was impossible: most units originally assigned the task had been recalled to their base camp, while others were headed towards Bu Dang and Bu Na as the General Staff had ordered. Tra had to reorganise his forces and change his plan. The supporting attacks would now be launched as diversionary forays to fix the enemy as the North Vietnamese waited to deliver the main offensive against Phuoc Long.

On 7 December 1974, elements of the PAVN's newly formed 303rd Division attacked Tay Ninh, northwest of Saigon. The 205th Regiment attacked a series of RF outposts along Route 13 northeast of the city, overrunning all of them except that at Soui Da. Its 7th Battalion then attacked Ba Den, a mountain rising out of the plain near Tay Ninh city, where a communication outpost was located. It was tenaciously defended by the 3rd Company of the RF 314th Battalion, which pushed back several waves of infantry assaults. By the day's end, the PAVN retreated, leaving behind more than 100 killed. The RF battalion at Soui Da made forays outside their perimeter, ambushing an enemy convoy and capturing a BS-3 100mm anti-tank gun. The ARVN 46th Regiment, 25th Division, pushing a column up Route 13 from Tay Ninh city, did not fare so well. Ambushed on 12 December about 3km short of Soui Da, it suffered heavy casualties. It took more efforts by the formation to clear out the roadblock. Meanwhile, the siege of Ba Den mountain continued, the North Vietnamese having

These M113s of the 5th ACS supported the ARVN 18th Division in its efforts to relieve Hoai Duc, on the eastern side of Saigon, which was attacked by the PAVN 6th Division in December 1974. (ARVN)

The aggressive commander of the PAVN B2 Front, Lieutenant General Tran Van Tra, sought the direct support of North Vietnam's Communist Party general secretary Le Duan to execute his plan of attacking Phuoc Long Province, bypassing the CMC and General Giap. (PAVN)

deployed several batteries of anti-aircraft artillery that made resupply by helicopters impossible. On 14 December, a VNAF F-5A was shot down by a SA-7 MANPAD during a flak suppression mission. Out of food and water, the defenders evacuated the position on 6 January. By mid-January, ARVN forces had stymied most communist efforts in the province, but the feint succeeded admirably; both the US and ARVN intelligence firmly believed for a time that Tay Ninh was the primary target.

On the eastern side of Saigon, another newly formed unit, the PAVN 6th Division, struck the district capitals of Tanh Linh and Hoai Duc in Binh Tuy Province. Here, the ARVN JGS and III Corps had excellent intelligence warning of the impending attack, but there were no regular ARVN units there. Territorial companies were deployed in the principal villages along local Routes 333 and 335, which generally followed the Song La Nga River. The PAVN 812th Regiment attacked Tanh Linh on 8 December, supported by the 130th Artillery Battalion and a sapper battalion. The next day, it had occupied the surrounding villages, captured two 155mm howitzers and held the road at Vo Xu, between Tanh Linh and Hoai Duc. The ARVN III Corps reacted by asking the 7th Ranger Group to clear the roadblock but it could not advance far. In fact, the PAVN 33rd Regiment had been entrenched there, with artillery support. Later, the ARVN 48th Regiment of the 18th Division joined the attack along Route 333 and was in heavy combat north of Gia Ray. It constituted an armoured task force with the 85th Ranger Battalion, with M41 tanks and M113 APCs of the 5th ACS, but the lead element never made it past Gia Huynh, still 16km south of Hoai Duc. General Dong, commanding the III Corps, then ordered the 18th Division not to try to press forward past Gia Huynh. With his corps under attack from Tay Ninh to Phuoc Long, he was unwilling to risk having four of his battalions cut off and decimated. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese blew a bridge south of Hoai Duc and occupied Vo Xu, completely isolating Tanh Linh. On 23 December, they launched five successive assaults, finally overrunning the last defences in Tanh Linh on Christmas Day. The PAVN 812th Regiment then attacked Hoai Duc and gained a foothold in the north-eastern and south-western edges of the town. The ARVN 18th Division moved the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 43rd Regiment by helicopter west and north of the town respectively, then began pushing the enemy out. By January, the situation had stabilised there.

The ARVN forces in Phuoc Long Province were commanded by Colonel Nguyen Tan Thanh. The troops at his disposal comprised the RF 362nd Battalion, four PF platoons at Duc Phong, the RF 340th Battalion at Son Be, the RF 341st Battalion at Don Luan and the RF 363rd Battalion at Bu Na. Thirty-four PF platoons were scattered about the hamlets and military installations around Song Be, while 14 PF platoons defended the eight villages in the Duc Phong subsector. South of Song Be, at the hamlet of Bu Dop, were nine PF platoons, with a similar number in the eight villages and outposts around Don Luan. These forces were supported by 20 105mm and 155mm howitzers and six V100 armoured cars. Anticipating a resupply convoy, Colonel Thanh started to clear Route 14. To protect his bases while the RF battalions were on the highway, the III Corps, lacking infantry reserves, sent to him as reinforcements three reconnaissance companies to Phuoc Binh and Song Be, one each from III Corps' divisions.

On 13 December, Tra attacked Phuoc Long Province with forces consisting of the 303rd and 7th Divisions, one anti-aircraft regiment, engineers and sappers, a formidable force against the four dispersed RF battalions and South Vietnamese militia units. The 303rd Division attacked Bu Dang, Duc Phong and Bu Dop. Another battalion was

The PAVN B2 Front attacked Phuoc Long Province on 13 December 1974. The city of Dong Xoai, the initial North Vietnamese objective that had been cancelled and then reinstated, finally fell on 26 December 1974. There, as well as at Bu Dop, the communists captured ARVN artillery and ammunition that solved in part their restrictions in this field. (PAVN)

Tightening the ring around Phuoc Binh by the end of December 1974, the PAVN B2 Front was permitted to use the 21st Tank Battalion of the 26th Armoured Group for the final assault against the capital of Phuoc Long Province. (PAVN)

hurriedly sent to Dong Xoai to probe its defences. All the initial attacks were repulsed, but after a day of fighting against the outmatched RF, Tra's soldiers captured Bu Dang. A day later, the North Vietnamese seized Bu Na, which had been defended by two platoons of 105mm howitzers. They continued their advance, sweeping away RF outposts on Route 14, and closed in on Dong Xoai, where the RF continued to hold out. By 17 December, over 80km of Route 14 had been captured. Fortune then smiled upon General Tra. While searching the destroyed fortifications of Bu Na, PAVN troops made a surprise discovery: the fleeing RF had abandoned their ammunition stores, leaving 6,400 rounds of 105mm ammunition and two intact 105mm howitzers. In an instant, Tra's heavy ammunition problem was solved. Given the ease of the victory and the impressive war booty, the Politburo allowed General Le Duc Anh, commanding the B2 Front forces in Tra's absence, to continue the attack towards Dong Xoai.

The North Vietnamese quickly prepared to seize both Dong Xoai and Bu Dop. Bu Dop was taken, before a counterattack regained it on 16 December. Another infantry regiment and sappers were sent to attack the RF battalion that was entrenched there, and the fighting continued for more than a week. Five battalions were meanwhile assigned to assault Dong Xoai itself. By noon, the ARVN III Corps recognised the serious situation and flew in the 2nd Battalion of the 7th Regiment, 5th Division, to replace the three reconnaissance companies grouped at Phuoc Binh. Landing at the nearby Song Be airfield, the unit assumed blocking positions between Phuoc Binh and Bu Dop but did not advance to the town. The VNAF C-130As also flew in six 105mm howitzers and evacuated the wounded. But the North Vietnamese artillery was soon in range and fired on the airstrip, destroying one C-130A and damaging another. On 23 December, the communists attacked Bu Dop again and quickly penetrated the outposts around the town. Despite intense VNAF air strikes, that were flown in the face of strong anti-aircraft opposition, Bu Dop was taken by nightfall. The next day, the North Vietnamese halted their advance in front of the 2nd Battalion's bunkers.

While the battle raged around Song Be and Bu Dop, the RF 341st Battalion continued to beat back successive assaults on its positions at Don Luan. The battalion lost the local airstrip on 17 December but counterattacked and took it back again. However, the town was now completely encircled and pounded by artillery. On 26 December, following a 1,000-round artillery barrage, the 167th Regiment of the PAVN 7th Division, assisted by diversionary attacks against ARVN positions in and around Phu Giao, finally overran Don Luan. The same day, the communists struck Dong Xoai. Attacking in the morning, they quickly breached the town's fortifications. Although the RF had earlier mounted a staunch defence, it crumbled under attacks by superior forces. The PAVN captured another 3,000 rounds of 105mm ammunition. With much of Phuoc Long Province now under PAVN control, Tra personally met with Le Duan. He explained that the remaining South Vietnamese defenders were isolated, and that the ARVN III Corps was incapable of dispatching strong reinforcements to lift the siege of Phuoc Binh. He asked permission to seize the city. Le Duan agreed, also allowing him to use a tank battalion and long-range 130mm artillery to capture the provincial capital; he was given the 21st Tank Battalion of the 26th Armoured Group and one independent artillery regiment.

Although the defenders were compressed into a tight defensive position, the terrain was advantageous. On the eastern and northern sides of Phuoc Binh flows the Be River, while dominating the city's southern side is Ba Ra mountain. Remnants of three RF battalions and PF soldiers held defensive positions around the city, supported by five artillery platoons. The 2nd Battalion of the 5th Division was placed in reserve. Arrayed against the defenders were five PAVN infantry regiments, five anti-aircraft battalions (37mm and 57mm), sapper and engineer units, three battalions of artillery (85mm, 105mm and 130mm) and a battalion of tanks (T-54s). Studying the terrain, General Le Duc Anh quickly determined that the key to seizing Phuoc Binh was the capture of Ba Ra mountain, which overlooked the city. His plan was to capture the mountain with sappers, while concurrently striking Phuoc Binh by throwing a regiment each along two roads into

A T-34/85 tank of the 574th Armoured Regiment at Duc Duc in July 1974. The unit supported the PAVN 2nd Division offensive southwest of Da Nang. Despite its obsolescence, the T-34/85 was used by the North Vietnamese until the end of the war. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

An SU-100 of the 95th Self-Propelled Artillery Battalion, attached to the 273rd Armoured Regiment, during the battle for Ban Me Thout in March 1975. The unit deployed 15 SU-100 tank destroyers that helped to stop short the ARVN 23rd Division heliborne counterattack. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

A T-54A of the 22nd Battalion of the 26th Armoured Group of the PAVN B2 Front in May 1974 during the fighting to control the Iron Triangle. Characteristically, the unit used a mix of T-54A, T-54B and Type 59 tanks. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

A Type 59 tank of the 574th Armoured Regiment during the battle for Thuong Duc in July 1974. The unit fought a series of engagements with the M41s and M48s of the 1st Armoured Brigade. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

A T-54B of the 273rd Armoured Regiment at Dak Pek in May 1974. The unit was the main armoured asset of the PAVN B3 Front in the Central Highlands. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

A T-54A of the 21st Tank Battalion of the 26th Armoured Group at Phuoc Binh in December 1974. The unit was practically annihilated during the fighting for Phuoc Long Province and had to be rebuilt from scratch. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

A PT-76B of the 273rd Armoured Regiment during the fighting at Ban Me Thout in March 1975. Typically, the brigade-strength unit operated a mix of T-54s, Type 59s, T-34/85s, PT-76s, K-63s and SU-100s. This amphibious light tank was armed with an additional DshK 12.7mm HMG mounted on a support welded on the rear of the turret. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

The North Vietnamese were always lacking in self-propelled anti-aircraft tanks to protect their armoured units. Only a small number of ZSU-23-4s and ZSU-57-2s were available, such as this example of the latter attached to the 201st Armoured Brigade. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

To bolster their limited number of genuine anti-aircraft tanks, the North Vietnamese adapted several T-34/85 tanks and obsolete SU-76 SP guns into that role. The work was done by the Z153 Armour Maintenance Depot, which replaced their original guns with 23mmm, 37mm or 57mm anti-aircraft guns. This modified T-34/85, armed with a twin 37mm AA gun, was captured by the South Vietnamese at the end of 1972 at Quang Tri. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

A PAVN K-63 (YW531) of the 6th Mechanized Company of 273rd Armoured Regiment on Route 7B in March 1975. Launched in pursuit of the South Vietnamese forces evacuating the Central Highlands, they clashed on several occasions with the ARVN M113s. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

An ATS-59G artillery tractor of the 675th Artillery Regiment towing a D-74 122mm gun at Ban Me Thout in March 1975. The North Vietnamese independent artillery regiments were equipped with the 122mm D-74, and the 130mm M-46 that outranged most of the ARVN artillery pieces. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

An AT-L light artillery tractor of the 593rd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment towing an S-60 57mm anti-aircraft gun at Ban Me Thout in March 1975. The North Vietnamese deployed three anti-aircraft artillery regiments for their campaign in the Central Highlands. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

An M41 tank of the 19th ACS of the ARVN 2nd Armoured Brigade at Plei Me in August 1974. The Walker Bulldog was the ARVN's standard tank, even though it was outgunned by the PAVN T-54. (Artwork by David Bocquelet

An M41 of the 10th ACS of TF-310 during the incursion into the Cambodian Svay Rieng Province, in the Parrot's Beak area, in April 1974. TF-310 was the only one of the three ARVN armoured Task Forces which did not have M48 tanks, only the Walker Bulldogs. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

An M42 anti-aircraft tank of the ARVN 4th Anti-Aircraft Battalion (Self-Propelled) captured by the North Vietnamese in the Central Highlands in March 1975. The vehicle wore an unusual camouflage scheme of olive drab green and earth, and still shows the US Army white star of its former owner on the turret. The communists simply added a Revolutionary Provisional Government (Viet Cong) flag before incorporating it into the PAVN 273rd Armoured Regiment's ranks. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

An M48A3 of the 20th Tank Squadron of the 1st Armoured Brigade at Da Nang in June 1974. The unit was held as a reserve for the ARVN I Corps, being engaged on various fronts on the verge of being breached. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

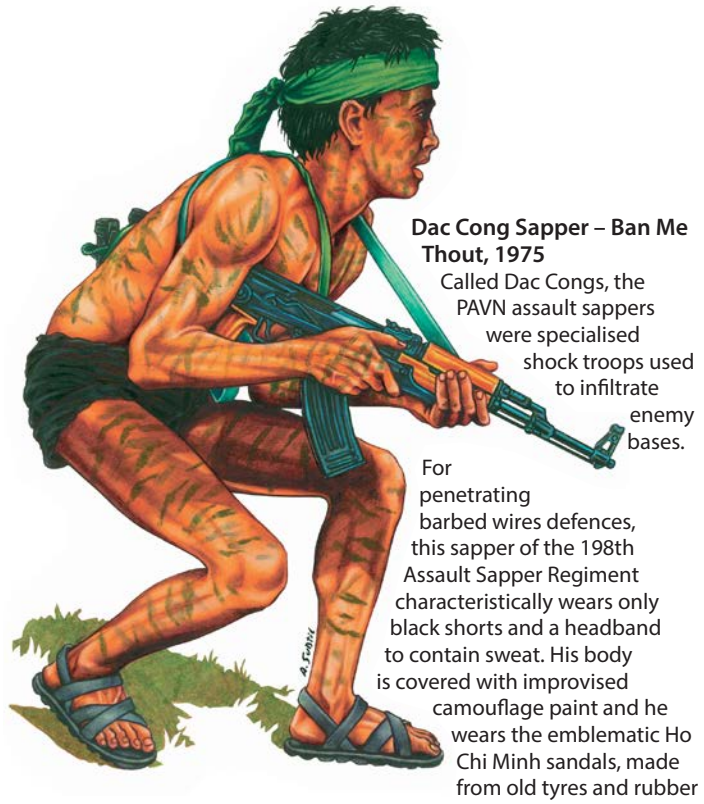
An M48A3 of the 23rd Tank Squadron of the TF-315, III Armored Brigade, at Svay Rieng, Cambodia, in April 1974. The Pattons played a key role in spearheading the last South Vietnamese incursion into Cambodia that saw the destruction of the PAVN 5th Division. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

An M113 of the 5th ACS, usually the constituent armoured unit of the ARVN 18th Division, III Corps, at Hoai Duc in December 1974. Note that this vehicle lacks the two M60 LMGs often installed on the rear compartment. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)

PAVN infantry soldier – Central Highlands, 1975
Part of the 3rd Infantry Division (Yellow Star Division), one of the most important and experienced communist formations in the south, this young soldier is well equipped for the harsh climatic and vegetation conditions in Vietnam. He wears the green uniform standard to all PAVN ranks, Chinese-made Bata boots and the characteristic North Vietnamese pith sun helmet. Note that the insignia on the collar were removed, something common for troops operating in the south. The rest of the equipment consists of a rucksack, canteen, canvas belt and 'Chicom' chest rig ammunition/magazine bandolier. His weapon is a Chinese 7.62×39mm Type56 rifle, a copy of the AK-47 with a permanently attached spike bayonet. In addition, an American-made fragmentation grenade is visible attached to the belt. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)

Grenadier – ARVN Airborne Division, Da Nang, 1974
In the 1970s, South Vietnamese airborne troops had already abandoned their 'windproof' camouflage pattern and adopted a camouflage derived from the North American ERDL pattern on their uniforms, although they still maintained their traditional left shoulder patch. The steel helmet is fitted with an M1-C Parachutist's Liner with its distinctive web A-straps and chin cup. The issued elasticated Helmet Band was intended as a camouflage aid but was more typically used in Vietnam to hold small items, as here with cigarettes of the local Ruby Queen brand. Another important item provided by the Americans are the jungle boots, of better quality than the Bata boots provided to other troops.

The M1956 LCE webbing is worn in typical fighting order with various items attached, including magazine pouches and the olive drab Plastic One-Quart Canteen. Apparently very tired, this grenadier is sitting on his rucksack, specially produced in the United States for the Vietnamese physique, but still has his M79 40mm grenade-launcher. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)



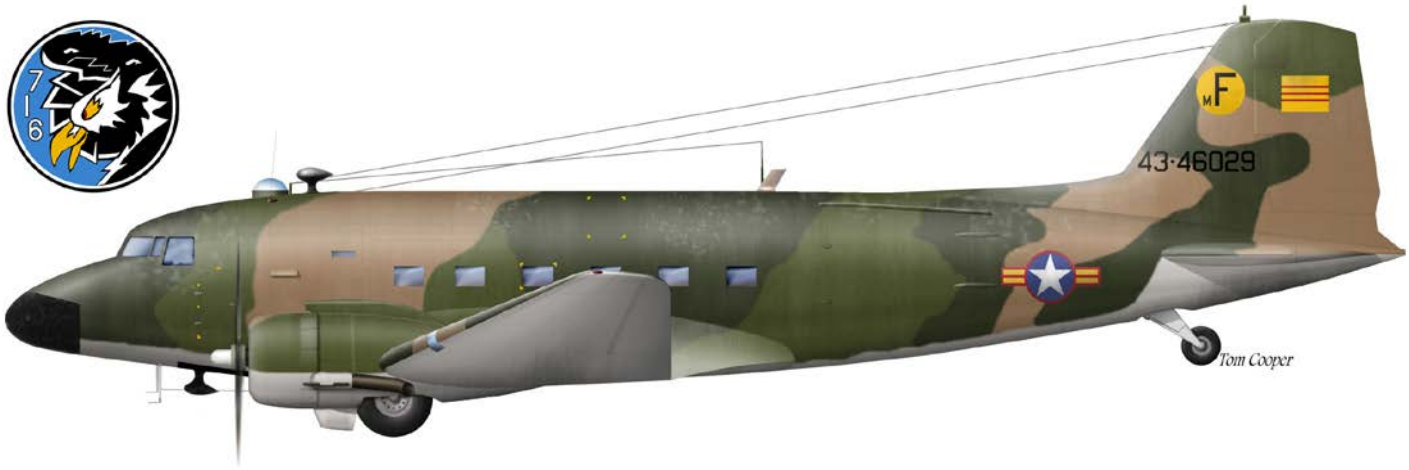
Dac Cong Sapper – Ban Me Thout, 1975
Called Dac Congs, the PAVN assault sappers were specialised shock troops used to infiltrate enemy bases. For penetrating barbed wires defences, this sapper of the 198th Assault Sapper Regiment characteristically wears only black shorts and a headband to contain sweat. His body is covered with improvised camouflage paint and he wears the emblematic Ho Chi Minh sandals, made from old tyres and rubber strips. He carries an AKMS assault rifle (or its Chinese copy Type 56-1) and a bag of Soviet RKG-3 anti-tank grenades, used to destroy concrete bunkers, although they often operated with only explosive charges and a barbed wire cutter. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)

ARVN infantry soldier – Pleiku, 1975
This soldier of the 23rd Division has an M1 helmet without any camouflage application and wears one of the many uniform models manufactured locally to meet the needs of the ARVN in the final years of the conflict, clearly based on the American Jungle Fatigue, and where you can see the 23rd Division shoulder patch on his left shoulder. His M1956 LCE webbing includes an unusual kick-release pistol belt and two pouches for the magazines of his M-16A1 assault rifle, in addition to several M26 fragmentation grenades. While units considered elite, such as Parachutists, Rangers and Marines had the US Army's jungle boots at their disposal, other troops had to settle for conventional low-quality boots or Bata boots made in Japan or elsewhere in Asia; the soldier illustrated here wears a model originally intended for CIDG montagnards. (Artwork by Anderson Subtil)

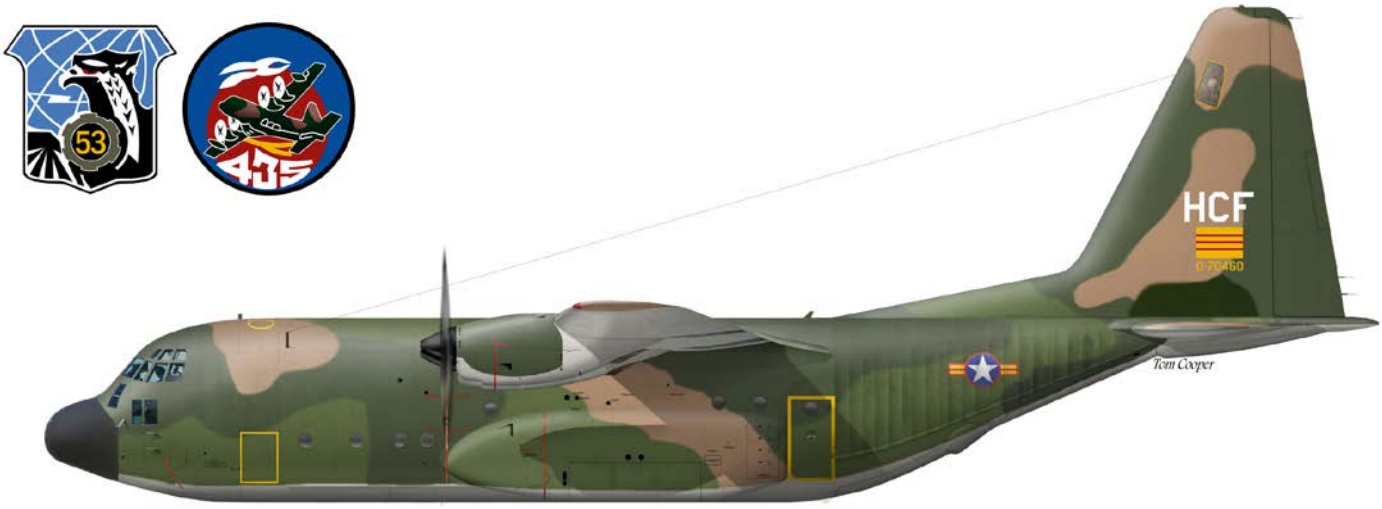
A UH-1H of the 223rd HS, 43rd Tactical Wing, from Bien Hoa. The unit was mobilised with the five other helicopter squadrons of that wing to support the ARVN forces during the battle for Phuoc Long in December 1974. (Artwork by Luca Canossa)

A 'gunship' UH-1H of the 217th HS from Can Tho AB, armed with the XM93 weapons system (including the 7.62mm GAU-28/A Minigun and the LAU-7H rocket pod), as seen in 1974. Notable are a number of upgrades that had been applied to most VNAF Hueys by 1973, including the package designed to lessen its vulnerability to SA-7s: this included the additional cooling and armour plate on the sides of the gear box, and an exhaust diffuser. (Artwork by Luca Canossa)

VNAF CH-47As were generally left in olive drab colours overall but received box-like flare dispensers on the rear fuselage to counter the SA-7 threat. The main artwork and insets show the minimal differences in the usual application of serial numbers in the 1973–75 period: only a few CH-47s received full tailfin codes. The '160' (probably from the 237th HS) is known to have been evacuated to USS *Midway* (CV-41) in May 1975. (Artwork by Ugo Crisponi)



The VNAF main SIGINT gatherers were the EC-47Ds, EC-47Ps and EC-47Qs, of the 716th and 718th Reconnaissance Squadrons. This EC-47Q belonged to the 716th Reconnaissance Squadron based at the Tan Son Nhut Airbase. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



This C-130A is from the 53rd Tactical Wing's 435th TS (coded HCF/0-70460, the latter part of which was short for its full US-FY-number 60-0460). Within the VNAF administration as of 1973-75, each aircraft received a set of individual tailfin codes, which were considered more important than their serial numbers. The first letter of the tailfin code identified the unit: C-130s of the 435th TS all had codes starting with HC. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

An O-2A of the 118th OS (from the Pleiku-based 72nd Tactical Wing), as seen in 1974. The fate of this aircraft remains unknown, but notable is the unusual 'high' window over the pilot's seat: this was usually only half as high. The aircraft is shown armed with a seven-tube LAU-7H rocket pod (for 2.75in/68mm unguided rockets), mostly used to mark targets for faster fighter-bombers. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

An A-37B from the 61st Tactical Wing's 516th Fighter Squadron, as operated from Da Nang AB in 1973-74. The aircraft is shown armed with an LAU-7H rocket pod and carrying two drop tanks on the underwing pylons. Notably, it didn't wear the typical 'bleu' (blue) fuselage band with white stars usually applied on the aircraft of this unit. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

The second fighter-bomber unit of the 61st Tactical Wing was the 528th FS, which operated this A-37B from Da Nang AB in 1973. This sister unit of the 516th FS decorated its aircraft with a blue fuselage band with white stars – an insignia usually associated with the entire 61st Wing. A Wing-crest was almost always applied on the right side of the fin, and that of the squadron on the left. The aircraft is shown armed with Mk.82 bombs and SUU-14 submunition dispensers. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

By 1975, A-37Bs of the 528th Fighter Squadron had received a slightly wider blue stripe with white stars around the rear fuselage – the application of which sometimes resulted in deletion of the national insignia, as on this aircraft. Notable is the slightly different version of the 61st Wing's insignia, as applied on the right side of the fin on this jet, which is also shown armed with an LAU-7H rocket pod. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

An A-37B from the 74th Tactical Wing's 520th FS, as operated from Binh Thuy AB in 1974. The aircraft of this squadron have had their rudders and wing-tip-fuel-tanks painted in yellow, dotted with stylised 'shooting stars'. This jet is shown armed with an LAU-61 pod for 19 2.75in (68mm) unguided rockets. Inset are the crests of the 74th Tactical Wing and the 520th Fighter Squadron. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

The second fighter-bomber unit of the Binh Thuy-based 74th Tactical Wing was the 526th Fighter Squadron – for which, sadly, only the generic unit insignia remains known. This unit is known to have painted the rudders and upper outboard surfaces of wing-tip-drop tanks of its Dragonflies in dark blue, with stylised white stars. This jet is shown armed with a single Mk.82 bomb. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

The Phan Rang-based 92nd Tactical Wing included three units equipped with A-37Bs: one of these was the 524th Fighter Squadron, an aircraft of which is shown here armed with the CBU-55 fuel-air-explosive bomb and one Mk.81. Inset are the crest of the 92nd Wing (applied on the right/starboard side of the fin) and the squadron crest. The same practice was followed by most other VNAF A-37B-units. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

The second A-37B squadron of the 92nd Tactical Wing was the 548th FS, at least a few aircraft of which are known to have received the – theoretically obligatory – tailfin codes. Overall, the latter appeared on only a very few Dragonflies, and then towards the end of the war in 1975. This jet is shown carrying the maximum war load for attacks on the communist forces that surrounded Phan Rang AB, including M117, Mk.82 and Mk.81 bombs. This Dragonfly is known to have been used later for an attack on Tan Son Nhut AB, on 28 April 1975, while operated by the North Vietnamese. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

This F-5A of the 536th FS (HJK/65-10544) was one of only a few former Iranian jets delivered in Project Enhance that was ever repainted in the Southeast Asia camouflage pattern – which consisted of tan (FS30219), green (FS34102) and dark olive drab (FS34079) on upper surfaces and sides. It was damaged by an SA-7 in January 1975, but subsequently repaired and returned to service with the 536th FS. It is shown armed with BLU-27 napalm tanks. Its final fate remains unknown. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

Another former Iranian F-5A was this example, which originally wore the US FY number 65-10482. When seen for the last time – at Bien Hoa AB, in early 1973, while apparently operated by the 536th FS – it still had no VNAF code, and was armed with SUU-14 submunition dispensers. The latter were usually used to launch anti-personnel bomblets in a rearward direction. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

The F-5A FY serial number 71-10268 was originally manufactured for Libya. Due to the US arms embargo imposed in 1970, it was delivered to South Vietnam instead on 21 June 1972, where it served with the 536th Fighter Squadron until being evacuated to Thailand in May 1975. Through all of this time, it retained its original silver-grey overall livery, although the engine covers and wingtip fuel tanks were replaced with those from camouflaged examples after the jet suffered some kind of combat damage. The aircraft is shown armed with LAU-61 pods for 2.75in/68mm unguided rockets. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

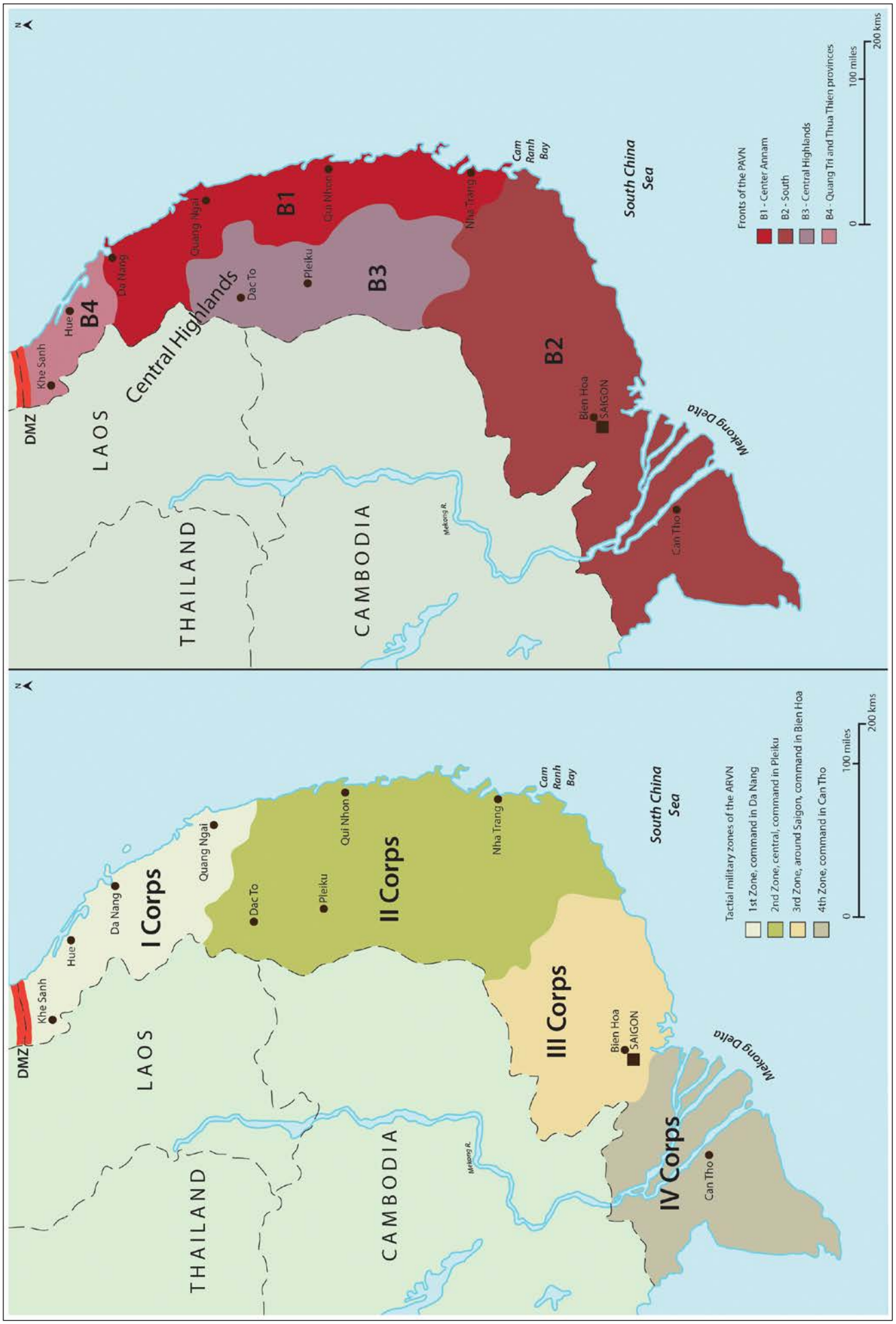
One of 54 brand-new F-5Es eventually delivered to the VNAF was this example, which is known to have been assigned to the 538th FS (61st Tactical Wing) at Da Nang AB until February 1975. It remained operational for a few weeks longer, until it was captured by the communists at Tan Son Nhut AB, on 30 April 1975, while still armed with four LAU-61 pods for unguided rockets. Subsequently, it was pressed into service with the ('united') Vietnamese air force and was last seen in operational condition in 1989. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

This F-5A (full FY serial number 71-1075) was originally manufactured for Libya, but eventually delivered to the VNAF on 20 June 1972. It served with the 540th Fighter Squadron of the 63rd Tactical Wing from Bien Hoa AB as of January 1975. It is shown armed with a US-made M117 bomb, together with the crest of the unit with which it served. Its ultimate fate remains unknown. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

Another mount of the 540th Fighter Squadron was this former Iranian F-5A – coded FUE/64-13358 – last seen at Bien Hoa AB in March 1975. It is shown with the – relatively rarely used – Mk.82SE bomb (Mk.82 equipped with the Mk.15 Snakeye retarding fins) used for low-altitude strikes (the inset shows a standard Mk.82 250kg bomb). As usual, the centreline drop tank was left in light grey overall. The ultimate fate of this F-5A remains unknown. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

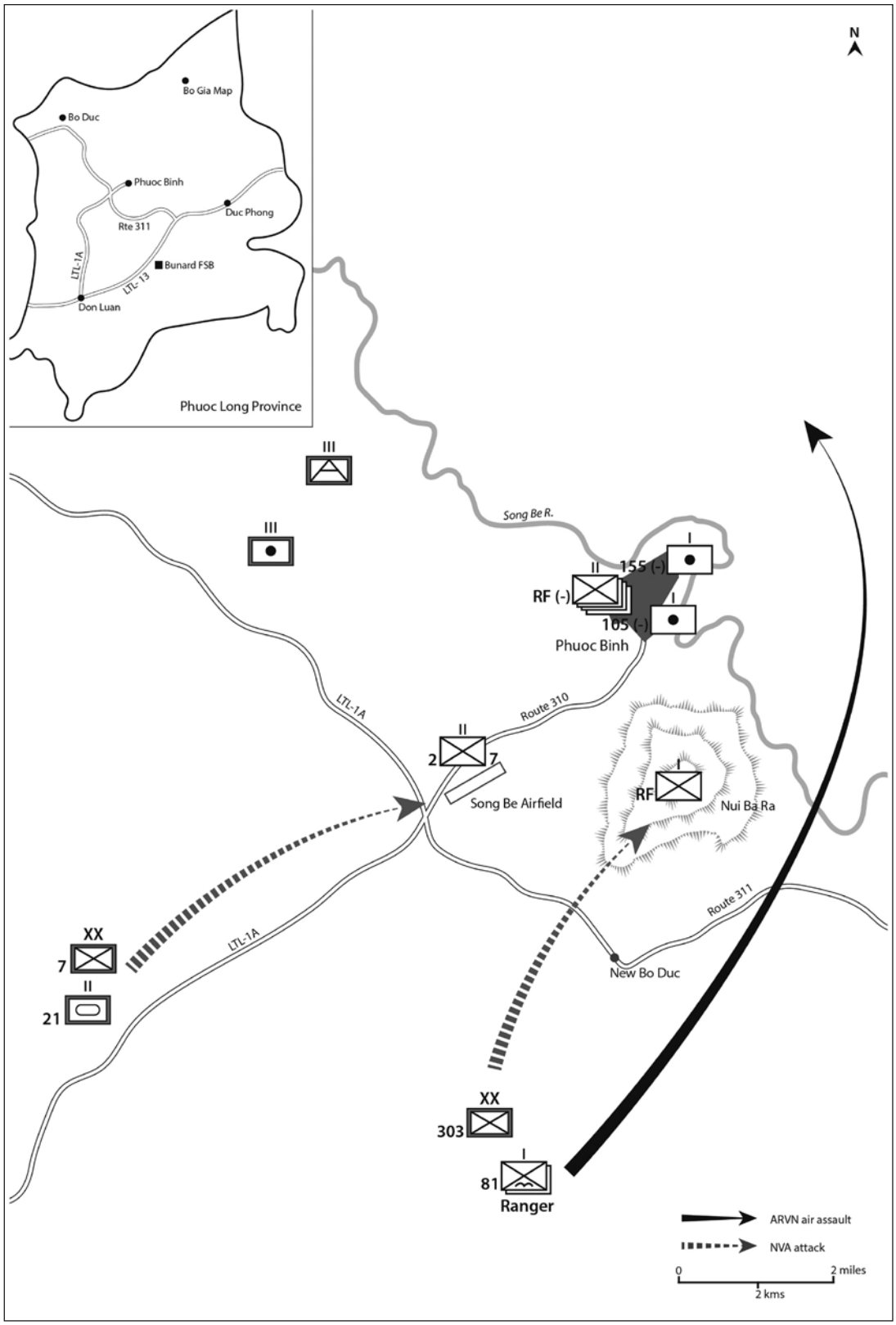
The VNAF's sole fast-jet reconnaissance asset was the 522nd Fighter Squadron, equipped with RF-5As. This example – full FY serial number 69-7162 – is known to have been damaged in 1975 by an SA-7 that caused an engine fire. The jet was returned safely to Bien Hoa AB, and was last seen with engines removed, but its ultimate fate remains unknown. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

The Shenyang J-6I 9837 is of an unknown unit based in Hainan, probably at Haikou AB, which participated in the Paracel Islands battle in January 1974. The units of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Naval Air Force (PLANAF) known to be operating J-6 fighters in Hainan at that date were the 10th Regiment of the 4th Division, the 16th and 18th Regiments of the 6th Division, the 4th Regiment of the 8th Division and the 25th Regiment of the 9th Division. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



Maps depicting the geographic organisation of ARVN and PAVN areas in South Vietnam. (Map by George Anderson)

South Vietnam, with major bases of ARVN divisions, and air bases of the VNAF. (Map by George Anderson)



The South Vietnamese offensive on the Phuoc Long in December 1974. (Map by George Anderson)

the city. He would punch a hole in the ARVN lines with infantry and then drive his armoured units into the city to capture the provincial headquarters. North of the capital, two regiments would block any attempt to retreat across the river. The last regiment would be held in reserve.

Refugees poured into Phuoc Binh, adding to the need for fresh supplies. The VNAF tried at first to bring in supplies by helicopter, but anti-aircraft fire was such that it made the effort very costly. The C-119Gs and C-130As then tried to drop food and ammunition by parachute. Ten attempts were made in early January 1975, but none of the bundles could be recovered. An improvised landing strip was then cleared along the main street in the centre of the town, where U-6 and U-17 light planes could land and bring in a trickle of supplies.

The PAVN's final attack began on 30 December, but all three assaults initially stalled in the face of strong resistance, while the VNAF flew some 53 sorties of A-37s and F-5s. Nevertheless, after additional heavy artillery shelling, the overwhelmed defenders were forced to retreat to a 3km perimeter around Phuoc Binh the next day. Two enemy regiments and a battalion of sappers, supported by eight T-54 tanks, attacked the base of the Ba Ra mountain but faced strong resistance. On 1 January 1975, the sappers finally conquered its summit.

On 2 January, President Thieu called an emergency meeting of his Cabinet to assess the situation in Phuoc Long Province. He was uncertain as to the true situation on the ground, mainly because the province chief's reports were overly optimistic. To regain the province, Lieutenant General Du Quoc Dong, commander of III Corps, requested immediate reinforcements, especially asking for part of his old unit, the Airborne Division, which was attached to I Corps. Beyond the fact that such a move would put the defence of Da Nang in jeopardy, it would also require too long a delay for its redeployment, without taking into account the difficulty of penetrating the enemy's air defences. Thieu thus rejected Dong's request, informing him that he must use only his own resources. When General Dong protested, a compromise was reached: the elite 81st Airborne Ranger Group, with 3,000 commandos highly trained for long-range reconnaissance and small-unit tactics, would be sent instead. This force was not, however, designed for regular infantry use, although it had performed magnificently in a similar situation defending An Loc in 1972.

At the time of the Cabinet meeting, the 81st Airborne Ranger Group was attempting to break the PAVN siege of Ba Den mountain in Tay Ninh Province. Only two companies, totalling 300 men, were

On 2 January 1975, the North Vietnamese occupied Song Be airfield, the only remaining link for the besieged city of Phuoc Binh. These troops are passing underneath the tail of a VNAF C-130A that had been destroyed on the ground on 16 December. In the background is the wreckage of a VNAF C-123K destroyed there in 1972. (PAVN)

Phuoc Binh could now only be resupplied by helicopters and light liaison planes which landed on an improvised air strip cleared along the main street in the centre of the town. One of the involved units was the U-6 Beavers of the 716th Reconnaissance Squadron, 33rd Tactical Wing, of Tan Son Nhut AB. (USAF)

not currently on the mission. These two companies would go in first, secure Phuoc Binh and await the arrival of the remainder of the 81st Airborne. The VNAF was ordered to divert aircraft from II and IV Corps, with around 50 additional A-37Bs, in addition to some 100 F-5A/Es operating from Bien Hoa, to provide firepower for the embattled provincial forces.

Meanwhile, the PAVN engineers had consolidated approach routes viable for tanks in swampy terrain caused by heavy rainfall over the previous month. The bed of the Dung, an estuary of the Be River, was layered with rocks, allowing the T-54s to cross it. On 2 January, the attack against Phuoc Binh resumed. The main assault took place against the southern perimeter, where the 12th Regiment was supported by 10 T-54s of the 1st Company of the 21st Tank Battalion. The 271st Regiment attacked the northeast sector with 12 T-54s of the 3rd Company, and the 10th Company was kept in reserve with 12 additional T-54s. But the North Vietnamese found themselves caught in murderous streets fighting. Their tanks were soon isolated, without accompanying infantry, and destroyed at close range by tank-killer teams armed with M72 LAW rockets. At 1600 hours, the 1st Tank Company took the ARVN artillery battery beyond the Dung River, but without accompanying infantry, the tankers were obliged to abandon the captured guns and race back to the Tu Hien crossroad. A new assault was launched the next day but could not advance far, the tanks being caught in a minefield and forced to stop. Several were then destroyed by VNAF F-5s. A single T-54 reached the ARVN artillery position and began to destroy the 105mm howitzers one by one but was also forced to retreat after exhausting its ammunition. Meanwhile, an attack was also launched against the nearby Song Be airfield, but could occupy only one extremity of the runway, four of the 10 committed T-54s having been destroyed by the ARVN tank-killer teams. The T-54 of the battalion's political commissar, Nguyen Xuan Liem, was caught alone and encircled by ARVN soldiers, who climbed atop it and tried to open hatches to drop in hand grenades. The crew manoeuvred and swung the turret, hoping to toss them overboard. Another T-54 joined in and opened fire directly against the attacked tank with its co-axial machine gun. By nightfall, the defenders had pulled out of the airfield and retreated towards central Phuoc Binh. The difficulties in infantry–tank coordination caught the attention of the PAVN Tank Corps deputy commander who was touring another headquarters in the South. He came personally to assess the situation and dressed down the officers of the two divisional headquarters involved in the battle. Up to that point in the struggle for Phuoc Binh, they had lost 18 T-54s.

On the morning of 3 January, the commander of the 81st Airborne Ranger Group, Colonel Phan Van Huan, flew a reconnaissance mission to Phuoc Binh and picked out a landing zone north of the city for his troops. Assembling his men at Bien Hoa airbase, he organised two groups of helicopters to land his soldiers. However, the first group did not lift off until the afternoon because of VNAF mismanagement.

The Airborne Rangers were landed during the North Vietnamese attack in central Phuoc Binh. However, after three days of street fighting, the last ARVN resistance was overwhelmed by T-54s of the 26th Armoured Group. (PAVN)

When the first wave of Bell UH-1Hs arrived over the landing zone, it turned out that it was being shelled by enemy artillery and was ringed with heavy anti-aircraft fire. Due to communication problems, the fighter-bombers that should have attacked the enemy batteries had not yet arrived. Huan consequently called off the mission.

The next morning, rain and fog at Phuoc Binh delayed the second attempt. An RF-5A was sent to select and photograph another landing zone. It was only the first week of January, but the RF-5A flying-hour allocation for the month had already nearly been used up. The photography disclosed seven 37mm anti-aircraft guns positioned nearby. Eventually, the helicopter pilots lifted off and followed the twisting Be River. This time, the fighter-bombers flew 60 strike sorties and cleared the landing zone of anti-aircraft fire. Lieutenant Colonel Vu Xuan Thong, commander of the initial task force, landed with his men and quickly linked up with the embattled defenders. The men of the second wave, however, were not so lucky. After leaving their helicopters, hundreds of 107mm and 122mm rockets pounded the area, causing moderate casualties. The Airborne Rangers reoccupied the regional governor's house as well as some nearby administrative buildings. They pushed back enemy troops in hand-to-hand fighting, knocking out a T-54 from a group of four that was heading towards them. On 5 January, the North Vietnamese did not launch any attacks but continuously pounded the city with artillery. The next day, the artillery barrage increased, with nearly 3,000 shells expended in the hours before another assault led by 10 T-54s. The Airborne Rangers fired on the enemy tanks at such close distance that sometimes the M72 rockets failed to arm. The ARVN was now down to 1,000 defenders, who faced over 10,000 North Vietnamese. The province chief, Colonel Thanh, wounded and under

By 6 January 1975, the North Vietnamese took Phuoc Bing, capital of Phuoc Long Province, the first provincial capital to be lost since the Paris Peace Accords. As predicted, Washington failed to react and did not send back the B-52s or even resume military aid to Saigon. The PAVN also got their hands on 17,000 artillery shells, as well as some howitzers. (PAVN)

On 3 January 1975, the North Vietnamese launched the final assault against Phuoc Binh, despite desperate resistance by the local defenders. (PAVN)

In a desperate move, it was decided to insert inside Phuoc Long two companies of the elite ARVN 81st Airborne Ranger Group. The men are seen boarding their UH-1H helicopters for the air assault on 4 January 1975. (US Army)

direct attack by four approaching T-54s, ordered a break-out from Phuoc Binh. By nightfall, the last pockets of resistance had died down in the first provincial capital to be taken by the enemy. The exhilarated Tra rejoiced at the victory, even though his losses had been severe, including 15 additional T-54 tanks destroyed during the last three days of the battle. The 21st Tank Battalion, which had been virtually annihilated during the fighting at An Loc in 1972, was destroyed a second time and had to be rebuilt from scratch. Nevertheless, the North Vietnamese troops revealed to an ecstatic Tra that they had captured a total of 17,000 105mm artillery shells, nearly half of his allotted artillery rounds for the beginning of his campaign.

The ARVN losses were also serious. Of over 5,400 men committed to the defence of Phuoc Binh, fewer than 850 made it back to South Vietnamese lines, cutting across the jungle. VNAF helicopters picked up some 200 of them in the days following the fall of Phuoc Binh. The province chief never made it to safety. Especially costly were the high losses of the irreplaceable Airborne Rangers; only 85 troopers could be retrieved of the two companies deployed. Meanwhile, about 3,000 civilians out of 30,000 in the town escaped capture by the communists. The few province, village and hamlet officials who were taken were summarily executed. The VNAF also paid a high price, losing 20 aircraft during the battle. As a collateral victim, Lieutenant General Du Quoc Dong was removed from the command of III Corps. As his successor, President Thieu reinstated Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Toan, dismissed from II Corps in November over corruption charges.

8
CUTTING THE GORDIAN KNOT

President Thieu announced three days of mourning for the fall of Phuoc Binh, in a symbolic gesture to draw the attention of the United States and push Washington to fulfil its promise of at least air support in view of such a blatant North Vietnamese breaching of the 'ceasefire'. At the White House, President Ford called a meeting on 7 January 1975 of the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG), a National Security Council committee in charge of handling serious foreign affairs crises. Despite Ford being genuinely sincere in his attempt to restore the situation in South Vietnam and Cambodia, he faced an increasingly hostile Congress. Any reintroduction of US armed forces into Vietnam would lead to a domestic political crisis of great magnitude. The President, in a TV address on 21 January, indicated that he would not reintroduce troops in Southeast Asia. Even sabre-rattling measures, like deploying aircraft carriers off the Vietnamese coast, were rejected, never mind the resumption of US reconnaissance flights over North Vietnam. Ford subsequently devoted all his efforts to gaining congressional approval for $300 million in military aid already approved for South Vietnam but not appropriated. He also tried to get an additional urgent $700 million package. Finally, he pleaded for a more comprehensive aid package of $3–4 billion, over a three-year period. Ford pushed for a bi-partisan Congress commission to visit South Vietnam, from 26 February to 2 March 1975, in a last bid to assess the situation. But that could not change the attitude of most of Congress, which saw no rationale to continue to support South Vietnam. Quasi simultaneously, a delegation of the South Vietnamese Senate also visited Washington, with Thieu's special envoy, Nguyen Tien Hung. They were politely received but found most doors closed to them. In a gamble to reverse the American decision, Hung later produced to US political leaders the personal letters written by former President Nixon, promising to again militarily intervene in case of "blatant violation" of the Paris Accord by the North Vietnamese. That provoked only a new political scandal, Congressmen claiming that they had been "betrayed" by Nixon, who had hidden from them the letters' existence.

Facing these setbacks, President Thieu ordered a thorough assessment of the tactical disposition of ARVN forces, as well as an inventory of all ammunition and equipment by region. He also wanted a more accurate village security evaluation. This information would form the basis of a new strategic plan for 1975. The South Vietnamese generals expected that the enemy would in all probability launch phased regional offensives, like they had in 1974, and that would surely start in late March. They correctly estimated that the PAVN would attack II Corps first, to drain the ARVN's reserves away, before developing attacks against I and III Corps. In the I Corps area, they guessed that the enemy would occupy Quang Tri Province and isolate Hue and Da Nang. Against II Corps, the North Vietnamese

In January 1975, the PAVN 316th Division from North Vietnam's strategic reserve was sent to the Central Highlands for the coming campaign. The drivers of these heavily camouflaged ZIL-157 trucks receives their final instructions before departing. (PAVN)

would surely try to annex Kontum Province, while for III Corps, Tay Ninh Province on the Cambodian border would likely be the main target, leaving IV Corps' area as a diversionary theatre. The ARVN JGS believed that if the North Vietnamese did not bring in any of their strategic reserve divisions, the South Vietnamese could defeat them with only limited loss of territory. Otherwise, the survival of South Vietnam was at stake. Thieu reacted by ordering the formation of new reserve units. The Marine and Airborne commanders were ordered to add a fourth brigade to their respective divisions. Because of the desperate need for more reserves, two new Ranger groups – the 8th and 9th – were cobbled together from demobilised military-police battalions and former deserters. With equipment scraped together from a few remaining stores, the units were assigned to the defence of Saigon and made a part of the JGS general reserve. It was planned to eventually send them to I Corps to replace the Airborne Division. I Corps was therefore ordered to draft a plan to release the Red Berets within 72 hours if Saigon was attacked. An additional 45 RF regimental-sized groups were formed. The groups were designed to provide the province chiefs and corps commanders with increased flexibility in shifting the RF to meet attacks. Already in October 1974, the ARVN Central Logistics Command had begun planning for future fighting by adjusting the remaining aid funds to purchase more ammunition and fuel. The US Defence Attaché Office estimated that it was essential to have a stockpile of 60 days' ammunition and fuel in South Vietnam to face a high-intensity enemy offensive. This would provide a cushion until US supplies could reach the country, if Washington decided to intervene again. Given the cutbacks, it was only possible to restore ARVN artillery ammunition stores to a 45-day level, while the fuel stocks were alarmingly low.

The North Vietnamese deployment of troops towards the southern Central Highlands sector went practically unnoticed by the ARVN, thanks to very strict camouflage measures, forces marching by night and under strict radio discipline. (PAVN)

By the end of February 1975, most of the units which would attack Ban Me Thuot had arrived undetected north and south-west of the city. These heavily camouflaged ZIL-130 trucks were from the PAVN 10th Division. (PAVN)

With ever gloomier prospects, Thieu again started to seriously consider pulling back his forces and population into more defensible positions. Retrenchment had been first raised in early 1974, but Thieu had rejected the idea as too difficult to implement. In late August 1974, he reiterated that view to visiting Admiral Noel Gayler, commander of all US forces in the Pacific, stating that "giving up any real estate creates psychological problems for his government". Despite Thieu's aversion to the plan, at the December 1974 National Security Council (NSC) meeting, Lieutenant General Cao Van Vien, supported by Prime Minister Tran Thiem Khiem, again raised the issue of ceding territory. When Thieu prevaricated, both turned to a former Australian officer, Brigadier Ted Serong, for help in convincing him. Serong had spent years in South Vietnam and had developed good connections with Thieu and other local leaders. He sent Thieu a plan that advocated a withdrawal from the I and II Corps areas to the more economically viable southern part of the country, especially since the potential oil deposits were located off the coast of this region. Thieu considered Serong's plan, but in the end, in January 1975, he rejected it. He was more than ever convinced that a withdrawal of such a magnitude would shatter the fragile socio-economic fabric that kept his country

The tanks of the PAVN 273rd Armoured Regiment had travelled undetected 300km to regroup at Buon La Van, around 80km north of Ban Me Thuot, at the end of February 1975. (PAVN)

together. Furthermore, for whatever reason – whether a blind refusal to admit that the mood in the US Congress had hardened or being too optimistic about the assurances given to him by President Ford – Thieu continued to believe the Americans would not betray him.

The developments in Washington delighted the Hanoi leadership, seeing that their poker game had succeeded. Two days after the fall of Phuoc Long Province, Le Duan concluded the enlarged Politburo meeting that had been held for 20 days, which included General Giap, the CMC, the General Headquarters, the Central Cell as well as the field fronts commanders. Even if uneasiness continued to permeate some leaders, still fearing a last-minute, face-saving United States intervention, he was now determined to fulfil his two-year plan to conquer South Vietnam.

The CMC then finalised the plans for the opening blow; the attack on the Central Highlands. The area was under the jurisdiction of the PAVN B3 and B1 Fronts. The former ran north to south from Kontum Province to Quang Duc Province in the underpopulated forests and mountains that the Vietnamese called the Tay Nguyen (Western Highlands). Assigned to that front were the 10th and 320th Divisions, along with the recently formed 198th Assault Sapper Regiment; two independent regiments, the 95A operating in the Kontum area and the 25th in Darlac Province; and an assortment of support units, including two artillery and three anti-aircraft artillery regiments and the 273rd Armoured Regiment. The B1 Front command stretched from the seaside resort of Nha Trang north along the coast to Da Nang, ending at the southern end of the Hai Van pass. It had the 3rd Division in Binh Dinh Province, the 52nd Brigade in Quang Nhai Province and the 2nd Division in Quang Nam Province, supported by two independent artillery regiments, understrength anti-aircraft units and the 574th Armoured Regiment. While they completed the final details of the offensive, the North Vietnamese pulled off another major intelligence coup. They obtained a copy of the ARVN JGS estimate of PAVN intentions from the NSC meeting in early December, plus the complete South Vietnamese disposition of forces, including the precise count by military region of artillery, armour and aircraft that Thieu had requested. Hanoi learned that the JGS expected an attack in the northern section of II Corps, and that ARVN troops were positioned accordingly. Expecting that the communists would cut the main routes leading to the area, the JGS had stockpiled enough reserves there for 60 days' high-intensity combat by 20,000 men without requiring additional supplies.

Two days after the Politburo meeting, Le Duc Tho unexpectedly joined the Central Cell planning room. His purpose was to emphasise that the Politburo wanted to attack Ban Me Thuot instead of Duc Lap. The most important city of the southern Central Highlands, with over 120,000 inhabitants, was already being envisaged to be taken, but many believed this would exceed the capabilities of the available forces. Lieutenant General Hoang Minh Thao, the B3 Front commander from November 1966 until July 1974, who knew the area the best, fervently advocated the choosing of this new target. He had already recommended the city be attacked in December 1973, and like Tran Van Tra had for Phuoc Long, he requested three strategic reserve divisions to accomplish this task. He argued that Ban Me Thuot was not only the main economic centre of the Central Highlands, with an important expatriate European community, but was also lightly defended and had many military depots, being the rear base of the ARVN 23rd Division. It was also a crucial crossroad, and it would thus be easier subsequently to attack down into the coastal lowlands and the port of Nha Trang. Thao reminded Giap that of the seven Highland campaigns since the beginning of the war, six had been aimed at the northern sector because

In addition to T-54s, the PAVN 273rd Armoured Regiment also deployed 12 T-34/85s. The now obsolete tank was still a potent foe for the ARVN M41. (PAVN)

of difficulties in supplying the southern sector, with the lack of roads and nearby depots. Only during the Tet Offensive of 1968 did the PAVN occupy briefly some parts of the town. But with vastly improved logistic corridors developed west of the city, it could now be seriously envisaged to attack it. Of the two main east-to-west roads from the coast to the Central Highlands, Ban Me Thuot straddled one of them, Route 21. The city had links further north via Route 14 towards Pleiku, which was linked to the coast with Route 19. The CMC also chose Ban Me Thuot because it was surrounded by coffee and rubber plantations that provided good cover for attacking forces. Pleiku, on the other hand, was heavily defended and its avenues of approach offered little concealment. If the PAVN forces had taken Pleiku, they would then have had to fight the ARVN 22nd Division down the mountainous Route 19 to the sea. Moreover, grabbing the Ban Me Thuot section of Route 14 and the section near Duc Lap, Quang Duc Province, combined with sections recently captured in Phuoc Long Province, would provide Hanoi's reserve forces with a motorised artery straight to Saigon.

During two weeks in January 1975, the CMC completed the year's campaign plans, including how the other theatres would coordinate their actions. The aim was to pin down the ARVN forces countrywide, to ensure that Saigon could not dispatch reinforcements to the Central Highlands. For the surprise attack against Ban Me Thuot to succeed, deception was critical. To ensure secrecy, the decision to make Ban Me Thuot the new target was so tightly guarded that only a select a few in the General Staff knew of the change. The B3 Front commander was not informed until late January, and the division commanders and their staffs who would carry out the operation were

In addition to divisional artillery, the North Vietnamese also deployed two independent artillery regiments for the attack against Ban Me Thuot, equipped with long-range 122mm and 130mm guns. These D-74 122mm guns are being towed by ATS-59G artillery tractors. (PAVN)

The PAVN 273rd Armoured Regiment also had two companies of K-63 APCs and some BTR-152s. (PAVN)

For the coming campaign in the Central Highlands, the North Vietnamese deployed the reinforced 198th Assault Sapper Regiment. With six battalions, it was the most powerful Dac Cong unit in South Vietnam. (PAVN)

The North Vietnamese devised a sophisticated radio communication deception scheme to lure the ARVN into believing that their forces were concentrating around Pleiku and Kontum, while they were deployed further south around Ban Me Thuot. The main targeted SIGIN gatherers were the VNAF EC-47P/Qs. (David Menard via Jean Pierre Hoehn)

In their deception plan, the North Vietnamese also built fake tanks positioned far away from the main intended theatre of operations. These engineer troops cheer the building of a new wooden replica of a T-54. (PAVN)

The VNAF also intensified its interdiction operations against enemy truck traffic, including the deployment of the 540th Fighter Squadron's F-5Es to Phu Cat AB, as well as rotational detachments of F-5As at Pleiku and Phung Duc (Ban Me Thuot), where the runway had just been lengthened. A group of pilots are ready to depart from this last location for an air strike against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia in January 1975. (Pham Quang Khiem Collection)

not told until early February. Even before the Politburo's plan was finalised, Giap had begun pouring reinforcements into the Central Highlands. In late December 1974, he shifted the 968th Division, a light division with only two regiments based in Laos, across the border into South Vietnam. Later that month, Giap also ordered the 316th Division to depart for South Vietnam. Since that unit had fought until then exclusively in Laos, its appearance in the Central Highlands was one of the great surprises of the coming campaign. The 316th Division departed North Vietnam on 15 January, leaving its radio transmitters behind to continue broadcasting reports in order to fool the South Vietnamese signals intelligence. The unit reached its assembly area southwest of Ban Me Thuot on 3 February, travelling down the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos and Cambodia in a long convoy of 800 trucks. In February, it was the turn of the 341st Division to reinforce the B3 Front, as well as the crack 95B Regiment of the 325th Division, from the PAVN forces in Quang Tri. Giap further dispatched the 27th Sapper Battalion to reinforce the 198th Assault Sapper Regiment, making the regiment – now with six battalions – the most powerful Dac Cong (assault sapper) unit in South Vietnam. Lastly, he dispatched another anti-aircraft and engineer regiment, along with 8,000 new recruits to replace future combat losses.

To conceal these deployments, the North Vietnamese carried out a sophisticated deception plan by conducting bogus road-building operations and creating false depots, and deploying unconcealed truck convoys, in the northern sector, while increasing skirmishes around Pleiku and Kontum. Intense radio communications were also generated to convince the South Vietnamese, particularly the VNAF EC-47P SIGINT aircraft, that most of the PAVN units were concentrated in the Northern Highlands. The South Vietnamese mostly took the bait and reacted by harassing the work parties with their long-range 175mm guns, while reconnaissance teams, inserted by helicopters, sabotaged the road-building equipment. The VNAF also intensified its interdiction operations against enemy truck traffic, including a temporary deployment of the 540th Fighter Squadron with F-5Es to Phu Cat AB that came in addition to the four squadrons of A-37Bs operating for the ARVN II Corps. Detachments of F-5As from Bien Hoa AB were also deployed at Pleiku and Phung Duc (Ban Me Thuot), the runway there having just been lengthened.

The Politburo send some of the PAVN's most experienced officers to oversee the offensive, including Major General Le Ngoc Hien, the General Staff's Chief of Operations, and Lieutenant General Dinh Duc Thien, head of the General Logistic Department. This command group was given the codename A75 and placed under the command of Lieutenant General Hoang Minh Thao, who had as his deputy the commander of B3 Front, Major General Vu Lang. The attack was called Campaign 2-75. Finally, as a direct representative of the Politburo and to ensure the importance of the coming campaign, the PAVN commander-in-chief himself, Senior General Van Tien Dung, came in person to the Central Highlands. It is an indication of the attack's strategic importance that, while Tra and the PAVN commanders in I Corps were denied the employment of heavy artillery and armour, Giap had authorised their use for the assault against Ban Me Thuot.

This ARVN M107 self-propelled 175mm gun is firing against a North Vietnamese road-building party north of Kontum in early February 1975. This was part of the PAVN deception plan, enticing the South Vietnamese to believe that they were massing forces there. (ARVN)

The ARVN II Corps at the last moment decided to reinforce the Ban Me Thuot sector by sending the armour of the 8th ACS there. Most of them were deployed at Duc Lap, with only six M41s inside the city. (ARVN)

Hoang Minh Thao arrived at the campaign headquarters in early February and gave orders to redirect the assets of B3 Front towards the southern part of the Highlands. The 968th Division would conduct diversionary operations to pin down ARVN forces around Pleiku and Kontum. Afterwards, the first blow of the campaign would commence with the 320th Division cutting Route 14 near Thuan Man District, halfway between Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot. After blocking Route 14, the independent 95A Regiment and B1 Front's 3rd Division would strike Route 19 west and east of the An Khe pass respectively. Simultaneously, the independent 25th Regiment would block Route 21 east of Ban Me Thuot. Once the battlefield was thus isolated, the 10th Division would overrun Duc Lap, 50km southwest of Ban Me Thuot. At that point, the 316th Division, the 198th Assault Sapper Regiment, the 24th Regiment of 10th Division and the recently assigned 95B Regiment, 325th Division, would attack Ban Me Thuot. After capturing Duc Lap, the 10th Division would move to Ban Me Thuot and join the battle if the initial assault was unsuccessful.

When the PAVN commander-in-chief, Van Tien Dung, arrived at the B3 Front Headquarters, he was angry to see that the main attack against Ban Me Thuot was allocated to the 316th Division, instead of the 10th Division. The B3 Front commander explained that he had changed the initial plan because the 10th Division was already deployed near Duc Lap. Furthermore, he argued, the 316th Division had been trained for urban fighting. However, he had rejected the proposal of his commander, Senior Colonel Dam Van Nguy, that they attack successively the outer defence perimeters; instead, he advocated a penetration into the heart of the city, by striking directly at its depots, command posts and the provincial governor's seat. That would paralyze the enemy reaction, not allowing him time to regroup and counterattack. After securing these targets, his troops would attack the remaining enemy positions from the rear. General Dung liked the daring plan, which he christened "lotus blossom". He emphasised the

For the coming 1975 dry-season campaign, the PAVN commander-in-chief, Senior General Van Tien Dung, went south himself to supervise operations. He settled in the Campaign 275 headquarters by the end of February. (PAVN)

The commander of Campaign 275, the North Vietnamese offensive in the Central Highlands, Lieutenant General Hoang Minh Thao, detailed his planning to the divisional commanders. In order to keep matters secret, they were not told of the details until early February 1975. (PAVN)

crucial role that would be played by the tanks of the 273rd Armoured Regiment. This unit deployed 64 tanks, including 12 T-34/85s and 15 PT-76s, the rest being T-54s, and had two mechanized companies with 24 K-63 APCs. Also attached to the regiment was the 95th Self-Propelled Artillery Battalion with 15 SU-100 tank destroyers. While ARVN attention was focused in the northern sector, the heavily camouflaged tanks and trucks carrying the troops towards Ban Me Thuot travelled mostly by night and in total radio silence, thereby mostly escaping detection. The 273rd Armoured Regiment was reinforced by a team of 28 officers from the Armoured Command, who directed that each tank would bring an additional 10 shells as well as 60 litres of drinkable water and 10–15 days of food. The tank tracks' imprints were removed as much as possible, and by the end of February the unit had travelled undetected 300km to regroup at Buon La Van, around 80km north of Ban Me Thuot. The vehicles were checked and repaired thanks to 94 tonnes of spare parts that had just been delivered.

By early March 1975, the PAVN had some 65,000 men in the Central Highlands, supported by 103 armoured vehicles, 82 artillery pieces and 343 anti-aircraft guns. Facing them was the ARVN II Corps with 78,000 men, but half of them were Regional Forces. They were supported by 150 guns and howitzers. The ARVN also deployed 117 tanks, including 54 M48s – the rest being M41s – as well as 371 M113 APCs. In addition, there were 20 V100 armoured cars and 12 M42 SP anti-aircraft tanks. On paper, the South Vietnamese thus fielded superior forces, but most of them were tied up north around Pleiku and Kontum, with many others dispersed in the various coastal lowland cities. It was therefore of utmost importance to keep secret the North Vietnamese deployment around Ban Me Thuot by convincing the ARVN II Corps chief, Major General Pham Van Phu, that he was right to amass most of his forces in the northern sector of his command, where he expected the main enemy assault.

After the fall of Phuoc Long, Phu agreed with the JGS that the communists would try to seize the southern portion of Route 14 at Duc Lap, like they had tried to do in late 1973, to shorten their supply line. Consequently, he dispatched the 24th Ranger Group to protect Kien Duc. But his attention was again focussed to the northern part of the corps' area. In January 1975, the ARVN 22nd Division captured a North Vietnamese soldier near the critical An Khe pass on Route 19. The prisoner had been accompanying the commander of the PAVN 3rd Division on a reconnaissance of the pass and was caught with a map showing the locations of the enemy's proposed blocking positions. This was a critical change in tactics. During the 1972 offensive, only a single PAVN regiment blocked the pass, and it took several months of joint South Vietnamese–South Korean effort to clear it. With a whole division, it would be extremely difficult to reopen Route 19, isolating both Kontum and Pleiku from their primary supply depots on the coast. Strengthening this analysis was the detection of the arrival of the PAVN 968th Division around Pleiku. Phu was now convinced that Pleiku, and not Kontum, would be the communists' main objective. Thus, in late January, his priority changed from guarding Kontum to securing Route 19 and Pleiku.

The ARVN 22nd Division immediately assigned its 47th Regiment to hold the pass, but Phu also remained concerned about northern Binh Dinh along the coast, the area in the province most often contested. Consequently, receiving spotty intelligence that the PAVN 52nd Brigade was moving in there, instead of assigning the entire ARVN 22nd Division to guard the pass, he ordered the 22nd to hold two regiments in the northern part of the lowlands, leaving its fourth regiment in reserve. But the II Corps intelligence officer, Colonel Trinh Tieu, disagreed with his chief, judging that the PAVN objective was not Pleiku but Ban Me Thuot. By crosschecking various human intelligence sources, as well as prisoner interrogations, he was convinced that the PAVN 10th Division had been redirected south, as well as the 320th Division. Another prisoner reported that the 25th Regiment, an independent unit of B3 Front, had been ordered to move east of Ban Me Thuot to cut Route 21. More importantly, on 4 February, a communication sergeant from the PAVN 320th Division deserted to the ARVN. He confirmed that his unit had moved south from its position around Duc Co, west of Pleiku, leaving its broadcasting gear in place to send out misleading radio messages. He also indicated that his unit was now assembling in Thuan Man District, on the border between Darlac and Pleiku Provinces. Furthermore, he provided detailed information on the North Vietnamese plans. He claimed that the 320th Division intended to cut Route 14, the 10th was planning to strike Duc Lap and the PAVN would assault Ban Me Thuot with two divisions, reinforced by artillery and tanks. He had disclosed

practically the whole enemy plan, but he did not know when the attack would happen.

President Thieu was briefed on this new information during a stopover two days later at the defensive position of the 44th Regiment, 23rd Division, about 15km northwest of Pleiku. He made yearly visits to each corps right before the Tet holidays to bring gifts to the troops and receive a briefing about front-line conditions. During the meeting, he asked Phu his opinion of the statements made by the defector. Phu responded that he felt the North Vietnamese were trying to deceive him into moving the 23rd Division to defend Ban Me Thuot, leaving Pleiku exposed. Thieu disagreed and ordered Phu to concentrate the 23rd Division around Ban Me Thuot, and to bolster it with a troop of M48s. The 53rd Regiment was deployed first to reinforce the nine RF battalions of Darlac Province. It deployed its 1st and 3rd Battalions inside the city, while the 2nd Battalion was sent to Duc Lap to reinforce the local 259th RF Battalion. ARVN forces inside and around Ban Me Thuot were also supported by the 231st and 232nd Artillery Battalions, a troop of M113s of the 8th ACS – the division's organic cavalry squadron – as well as a half dozen M41s kept in reserve at the base camp of the armoured squadron. A dozen more M41s were deployed at Duc Lap. A week later, however, Phu cancelled moving the rest of the 23rd Division, apparently without President Thieu's knowledge. Phu had received new signal intelligence that the PAVN 320th Division was again transmitting radio messages from its usual location at Duc Co. Now convinced the defector was a plant, Phu terminated the move of the 23rd Division.

It was a huge mistake. Knowing that their plans had been disclosed, the North Vietnamese astutely exploited the South Vietnamese indecisiveness in intelligence analysis by pretending, in their numerous messages, that the enemy had not taken the bait of the false leaking of the plans to attack Ban Me Thuot. The PAVN 19th Signal Regiment, pretending to be the Central Highlands Campaign Headquarters, increased the fake messages, giving the impression that the North Vietnamese were continuing to concentrate their forces around Pleiku. That encouraged Phu in believing that the enemy would in the end attack the northern Central Highlands. He redeployed his forces accordingly along this perceived threat.

On the advanced portion of his front was Kontum, defended by the 21st, 22nd and 23rd Ranger Groups, while the 6th Ranger Group held Route 14 between Kontum and Pleiku. This force was commanded by Colonel Pham Duy Tat, the II Corps Ranger commander. The Pleiku garrison, further south, was commanded by the head of the 23rd Division, Brigadier General Le Trung Tuong. The 44th and 45th Regiments of the division, with the 25th Ranger Group, guarded the approaches to the city, the most important in the northern Highlands, with the II Corps Headquarters and an important airbase. In reserve at Pleiku, Phu had the 4th Ranger Group, three troops of M48s from the 21st Tank Squadron and one troop of M113s. The corps reserve could also rely on the 3rd and 19th ACS, the two cavalry squadrons having around 34 M41s and 130 M113s.

Still in a quandary as to where the enemy would strike first, Phu was summoned to Saigon on 19 February for an urgent meeting with the other corps commanders, the JGS and President Thieu. He was briefed on additional intelligence information. Tank tracks had been spotted by patrols near Ban Don on the Cambodian border, around 37km northwest of Ban Me Thuot. Regional troops in Quang Duc Province also spotted large truck convoys transiting in Cambodia, just in front of the Duc Lap outpost. The VNAF also surprised and attacked a large column of trucks in the same area, while also destroying a pontoon bridge and motorised barges. Phu again insisted these were diversions. Thieu finally accepted his point of view and believed that Hanoi would attack either Kontum, Pleiku or Duc Lap in the Central Highlands. Ban Me Thuot was thought to be only a secondary target. The PAVN intelligence soon learned of the meeting, confirming to Giap that his plans remained secret.

Phu actually had few options remaining other than a defensive posture. Unsure whether the PAVN 320th Division was around Pleiku or Ban Me Thuot, he could not take the risk to strip his front lines in the northern sector. Furthermore, the JGS issued new directives to conserve resources, even scrapping the order of October 1974 limiting corps to only one 10-day operation per month. Now, each corps commander had to carefully evaluate the desirability of any operations from battalion size upward. Every bullet and each drop of gasoline had to be counted. Phu reassured himself by believing that if the North Vietnamese attacked Ban Me Thuot, he could rapidly airlift troops to the city. However, he vastly overestimated VNAF capabilities, a service also hard hit by the budgetary cuts, without even taking into account the vastly expanded PAVN anti-aircraft assets that made any heliborne assault a very costly operation. To calm his own uncertainty, Phu dispatched the 45th Regiment of the 23rd Division from Pleiku to Thuan Man, a district seat about halfway between Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot. Its mission was to seek evidence that the elusive PAVN 320th Division was near Route 14. After the 45th Regiment had finished searching, Phu planned to send it to Ban Me Thuot. The North Vietnamese immediately pulled out all troops in the search area into Cambodia. Furthermore, they continued their hoax campaign by sending a message reading: "The enemy has fallen for our deception plan and believes we will attack Ban Me Thuot. That is why he has sent 45th Regiment south."

Reading it, Phu cancelled the 45th Regiment's onward movement to Ban Me Thuot. However, he left it at Thuan Man to continue searching. However, on 28 February, a North Vietnamese artilleryman from a scouting party, searching emplacements for guns, was captured less than 10km from Ban Me Thuot. He indicated that his unit would support an attack on the city, but, badly wounded, could give no further information. The North Vietnamese reacted immediately and ordered the 968th Division to launch a series of diversionary attacks around Pleiku. Rockets even hit the II Corps Headquarters, as well as the airbase. Then on 4 March, a young North Vietnamese lieutenant of the 316th Division dropped his diary, in which he noted that he had left North Vietnam on 24 January and was going to attack Ban Me Thuot. The diary was recovered and sent for analysis, but fortunately for the lieutenant, he did not identify his unit. With all these signs that Ban Me Thuot was still high on Hanoi's agenda, the JGS top intelligence officer, Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, went to see Phu and tried to convince him of the importance of the Central Highlands southern sector, but Phu declined to meet with him. US intelligence also provided contradictory information. The CIA's base in Ban Me Thuot was recently closed, but the Saigon station chief, Thomas Polgar, also believed that Ban Me Thuot would be the primary target thanks to human intelligence sources. USAF aerial photo reconnaissance could not provide more help, as it was also severely hindered by the budgetary cuts. Only a limited number of sorties were flown by the RF-4Cs of the 14th TRS of the 432nd TRW, based at Udorn in Thailand, in the only remaining active US forces operations in South Vietnam. It had only resumed recently, after the North Vietnamese shot down an RF-4C in November 1974, as well as two Firebee RPVs.

However, the Defence Department would not accept the CIA's analysis without confirmation from signal intelligence. Apparently, the Americans were also partially fooled by the Communist fake radio transmissions campaign; but not completely. On 7 March, the head of the South Vietnamese Signal Intelligence Branch, Brigadier General

Pham Huu Nhon, and the American head of the National Security Agency (NSA) in South Vietnam, Tom Glenn, flew to Pleiku to see Phu. They indicated that due to a combination of radio direction finding, message traffic analysis and a few readable messages, they were convinced that Ban Me Thuot would be the real enemy target. General Nhon, who had previously warned the JGS that the PAVN were about to attack Phuoc Long, treated Phu with great respect, but the corps chief still did not believe his analysis. With hindsight, it appears there was a breakdown in intelligence coordination between South Vietnam and the US, and between American agencies. But there is no answer why, given that Nhon's analysts shared all their information with their US counterparts, and had determined the true enemy objective, most of the Americans failed to reach the same conclusion. Ultimately, the North Vietnamese deception and concealment efforts were extraordinarily successful.

The Battle for Ban Me Thuot

Adhering closely to their doctrine, the North Vietnamese, after a meticulous preparation of the proposed battlefield, now isolated it. The opening round of Campaign 275 involved attacks launched by the PAVN 3rd Division against Route 19, the lifeline linking Pleiku to the coast, on 4 March 1975. The road began at Route 1, near the port of Qui Nhon, and cut through the treacherous An Khe pass, scene of numerous ambushes against US Army convoys, then continued to the famous Mang Giang pass, where in 1954 the French Mobile Group 100, a regimental motorised task force, had been ambushed and almost destroyed. The road was defended by the 47th Regiment of Colonel Le Cau and 22nd Division of Brigadier General Phan Dinh Niem, along with Regional Forces. Enemy sappers blew up Bridge 12, southeast of Binh Khe, and Bridge 13, near An Khe pass, on 4 March. This was the signal for most of the ARVN posts to be pummelled by artillery: 28 pieces of 85mm and 105mm. An assault by the PAVN 12th Regiment, 3rd Division, near An Khe airfield was repulsed but on the western side of Route 19, a string of posts held by RF troops were attacked by the PAVN 95A Regiment. By late afternoon, the North Vietnamese had captured a large stretch of the road on the western side of the Mang Giang pass. General Phu could only dispatch a battalion of the 4th Ranger Group with some M113s to try in vain to reopen the road. He also ordered the 42nd Regiment of 22nd Division to reinforce the small town of Binh Khe, on the eastern side of Route 19.

The opening round of Campaign 275 saw attacks launched by the PAVN 3rd Division against Route 19 to cut one of the two main roads linking the Central Highlands to the coast. These artillerymen are preparing their 105mm howitzers to target the An Khe pass. (PAVN)

On 4 March 1975, the PAVN 95A Regiment also captured a large stretch of Route 19 on the western side of the Mang Giang pass. This ARVN convoy of M35 trucks was forced to turn back to the port of Qui Nhon. (PAVN)

The next day, the North Vietnamese also closed Route 21, the other major road to the Central Highlands, connecting the port of Nha Trang to Ban Me Thuot. The PAVN 25th Regiment overran an RF outpost at Chu Xue, entrenching there and sending sappers to blow up two nearby bridges. The only two available roads to the Highlands were then closed in 24 hours of concentrated assaults. The enemy also increased pressure against the positions of the 44th Regiment north of Pleiku as well as Ranger positions around Kontum to tie down there most of the ARVN II Corps assets. General Phu was forced to assemble an improvised task force, made up of several RF battalions that could be spared from the coastal provinces, to try to reopen Route 21. The counterattack started on 7 March, but despite support from the VNAF, artillery and armoured forces, the Regional

troops failed to dislodge the North Vietnamese holding the high ground astride Route 21.

The same day, elements of the PAVN 48th Regiment, 320th Division, cut Route 14 between Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot, at the Chu Se pass about 60km north of the latter town. The next day, the 48th Regiment, with the 9th Regiment in support, overran the lightly defended district seat of Thuan Man. The town was located at the crossroads of Route 14 and the provincial Route 7B, leading to Cheo Reo. This was 120km north of Ban Me Thuot and 82km south of Pleiku. The ARVN 45th Regiment, which had been searching for the 320th Division for several days, now finally found it!

The ARVN II Corps tried to reopen Route 19 by launching attacks against both of its ends. The main effort was by the 42nd Regiment, 22nd Division, on the eastern side of the road. This battery of M114 155mm howitzers supported an attack in the Binh Khe sector. (ARVN)

Simultaneously, the ARVN II Corps sent the 4th Ranger Group with some M113s to try to punch through the blockade put in place by the PAVN 95A Regiment on the western side of Route 19. This M113 was destroyed during fighting to gain access to the Mang Giang pass. (ARVN)

General Phu was now forced to realise that Ban Me Thuot was obviously the main battlefield, or at least the southern portion of the Central Highlands, with immediate and supporting objectives being Buon Ho and Duc Lap. He still believed that only part of the PAVN 10th Division was deployed there, as his intelligence indicated that one to two of its regiments were still around Pleiku with the PAVN 968th Division. Phu needed to reinforce his troops quickly around Ban Me Thuot. He asked the JGS for an additional Ranger group but was turned down. Failing to acquire additional units from outside his command, he immediately pulled the 72nd and 96th Ranger Battalions of 21st Ranger Group from the Chu Pao pass and Kontum and flew them by helicopter to Buon Ho, 34km northeast of Ban Me Thuot. From that position, they could either move against Thuan Man and help to clear Route 14 or be sent south to reinforce Ban Me Thuot. True to his temperament, Phu reacted quickly, showing himself on the various battlefields with his helicopter or boarding a C-47 configured as an airborne command post, to direct operations. It was the *esprit de corps* expected from a former airborne officer. Yet while such action was required of a brigade or division commander, corps command was quite different. Courage alone was not enough. Phu was good at reacting, but not in planning ahead or facing adversaries who had war-gamed in advance every one of his moves.

PAVN generals Dung and Thao had now finalised their plans to attack Ban Me Thuot. As already indicated, the first blow would fall on Duc Lap, 67km southwest of Ban Me Thuot, which would be attacked by the 10th Division. It would have one or two days to take the district capital. Then, the assault proper was set for 10 March, to be carried out by the 316th and 320th Divisions, three independent regiments, two independent artillery regiments, two engineer regiments and the reinforced 273rd Armoured Regiment. The whole battlefield was protected from air attacks by the 232nd, 234th and 593rd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiments, equipped with 37mm and 57mm guns. The 10th Division would participate in the offensive after conquering Duc Lap. Taking no risks, the North Vietnamese had achieved a local numerical superiority of five to one in terms of infantry and armour, and two to one in artillery.

On 9 March 1975, the North Vietnamese completed the sealing of the Ban Me Thuot battlefield by attacking Duc Lap, 67km southwest of the city. These troops of the PAVN 10th Division stormed the ARVN 23rd Division tactical headquarters at the Dak Song crossroads, knocking out a dozen M41 tanks of the 8th ACS in the process. (PAVN)

After two days of fighting, the PAVN 10th Division completed its occupation of Duc Lap. It captured several pieces of artillery, such as this 155mm howitzer. (PAVN)

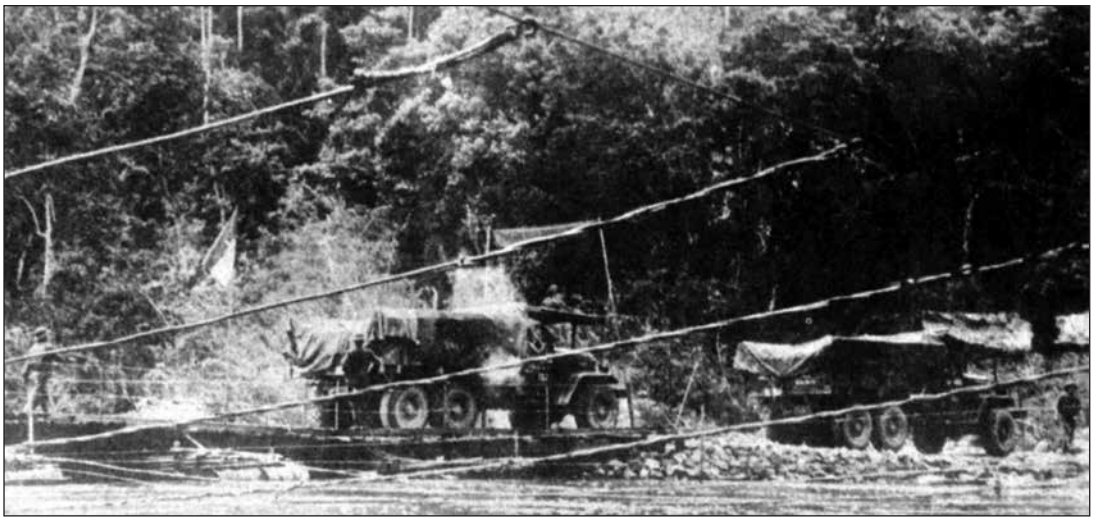
Their units would be deployed into three attack sectors: north, northwest and southwest. By early March, most of the involved units had arrived at their temporary assembly positions 10–15km from the city. Tank units were further away, 35–40km, north of Buon La Tu and Buon Dung villages. The A75 Campaign Headquarters had to coordinate a complex movement of five separate attack columns. Each was a combined-arms operation that would penetrate the city to capture the command centres and major installations.

The initial assault would be led by the 198th Assault Sapper Regiment, with three battalions. The sappers would attack in conjunction with a two-hour artillery barrage to paralyze four main targets: the city airfield, the 53rd and 44th Regiment base camps, the Mai Hac De ammunition storage facility and the larger Phung Duc airfield east of the city. Another target was the main six-way intersection in the town's centre, near the Catholic church and the central market. These shock troops, armed with AT-3 anti-tank missiles and 75mm and 82mm recoilless guns, had to pin down the ARVN troops there, entrench themselves and await the arrival of the motorised columns. Their main targets were the 23rd Division headquarters, the Darlac Province headquarters and the 8th ACS base camp. The 316th Division, reinforced by the 2nd Armoured Battalion of the 273rd Armoured Regiment, would control three columns. One would hit from the northwest with the 148th Regiment, another from the southeast with the 149th Regiment and a third from the southwest with the 174th Regiment. Each column was supported by an anti-aircraft battalion and tanks. Their vanguards were made up of a motorised task force of eight tanks and eight K-63 APCs, and a battalion of infantry mounted on trucks towing 85mm field guns and 37mm AA guns.

The 10th Division, reinforced by the 3rd Armoured Battalion, commanded the fourth and fifth columns. The fourth prong was the independent 95B Regiment, while the fifth spearhead was the 24th Regiment of the 10th Division. The 95B Regiment would attack from the northeast to secure the main six-way intersection, the city airfield and the provincial headquarters. The 10th Division's strike force would seize the ARVN 23rd Division headquarters in combination with the southwestern column. The 320th Division of Senior Colonel Kim Tuan, with the 1st Armoured Battalion and a company of SU-100 tank destroyers, formed the second echelon. The independent 40th and 675th Artillery Regiments, with long-range D-74 122mm and M-46 130mm guns, would fire in support of the attackers.

Dung and Thao staked everything on the initial assault. The plan was to commit virtually their entire force to a mad dash into the city, gambling that they could overwhelm Ban Me Thuot in one massive blow. Only one battalion from the 10th Division remained in reserve. If the South Vietnamese survived the first onslaught, and Phu was able to reinforce the defenders, Dung's troops would be trapped in the open, cut off from any easy retreat. The plan depended heavily upon reaching the jump-off positions undetected. This was perhaps the most difficult aspect of the operation. The south-eastern column marched for two days and nights, forded two rivers and crossed Route 14 unobserved. The northern columns had to cross through numerous

settled areas and outposts. The armoured units had a formidable task: depart from hiding spots without getting lost or stuck, cut through thick forests and cross the wide and fast-flowing Srepok River on a TPP pontoon bridge and motorised rafts deployed by the 7th and 575th Engineer Regiments. The engineers' bulldozers also opened connecting tracks to the main routes. Large trees along these roads had been cut two-thirds of the way through their trunks. When the time came to attack, the tanks simply pushed the trees down.



The PAVN 273rd Armoured Regiment left its hiding place, some 40km north of Ban Me Thuot, and had to cross the fast-flowing Srepok River on a TPP pontoon bridge that the engineers laid down at the last moment. (PAVN)

The PAVN 149th Regiment, 316th Division, formed the south-eastern attack column marching against Ban Me Thuot, travelling for two days and nights and fording two rivers. These CA-30 trucks forded one of them on a riverbed consolidated with crushed rocks. (PAVN)

After isolating Ban Me Thuot, the North Vietnamese moved against the city's southern external and exposed positions, Duc Lap and Kien Duc. Duc Lap was considered a tough nut to crack, protected by five fortified strongpoints around the town, with underground bunkers and minefields. The defenders included the 2nd Battalion of the 53rd Regiment, the RF 259th Battalion, three artillery batteries (14 105mm and 155mm howitzers) and a dozen M41 tanks. The commander of the PAVN 10th Division, Senior Colonel Ho De, also decided to gamble everything on one great assault, to quickly overwhelm the enemy, and return immediately to participate in the attack against Ban Me Thuot. He made a risky plan to bypass the strongpoints on the outer perimeter and strike at three chief targets: the main military base, a 23rd Division tactical headquarters at the Dak Song crossroads and the district headquarters inside the town. Two battalions would attack each target. The 10th Division would be supported by a company of T-54s, but that did not arrive in time for the attack's launch on 9 March. The division relied on its own artillery assets, with 15 85mm field guns, 105mm howitzers and 120mm mortars. Fortunately, the local ARVN commander, instead of using his tanks in an offensive way, had deployed them ineptly in hull-down static positions to protect the command post. By midday, the North Vietnamese had occupied the firsts two targets, and the tanks were neutralised by infiltrating teams armed with RPGs and recoilless guns. Only the assault against the district headquarters fared badly. The RF forces, supported by air strikes, fought back. Suddenly, the district commander, Lieutenant Colonel Nguyen Cao Vuc, broadcast a non-coded radio message that he was retreating. The North Vietnamese surged forward, but it was a trap. As the communists moved in, they were ambushed by the RF troops, firing their 105mm howitzers point-blank and inflicting heavy casualties. By noon, the two PAVN battalions were pulled back to regroup for a new assault the next day. The engineer troops cleared out a route to the top of a nearby hill, where two 85mm guns were dragged. At daybreak on 10 March, the guns poured shells onto the RF defences, destroying many bunkers. At 0830 hours, Duc Lap fell. Concurrently, the 24th Ranger Group at nearby Kien Duc was attacked by the PAVN 271B Regiment, attached to B2 Front. The first assaults were pushed back, but now isolated, the Rangers were overrun five days later. Only the 82nd Ranger Battalion with some other elements of the 24th Ranger Group succeeded in breaking out.

Throughout 9 March, the North Vietnamese also increased artillery fire against Kontum and Pleiku, particularly targeting their airfields. Civilians rushed to board the outbound Air Vietnam DC-3s and DC-4s. Phu came to Ban Me Thuot to review the situation and nominated the deputy commander of the 23rd Division, Col Vu The Quang, as field commander of the southern Central Highlands. Quang immediately put all his available forces on alert and ordered the dispersal of ammunition and fuel stocks. He pulled back the 21st Ranger Group from Buon Ho to Dat Ly, 10km northeast of Ban Me Thuot, and moved the RF 224th Battalion from Ban Don, 36km west of the town, to the southern reaches of the city. Later in the day, the two remaining RF battalions at Ban Don were boarding C-130As for the short trip to Ban Me Thuot. But night had fallen, and the city's main airport runway lighting system was not functioning, so the troops were

On 9 March 1975, the North Vietnamese positioned their artillery within range of Ban Me Thuot to support the ongoing offensive. This crew of a BM-13 MRL is given its final instructions. The rocket launching system was made up 16 132mm rockets mounted on launching rails installed on a ZIL-151 truck chassis. (PAVN)

On 10 March 1975, Ban Me Thuot was simultaneously attacked by five converging columns, with heavy artillery support. These PAVN artillerymen open fire with their D-74 122mm guns. (PAVN)

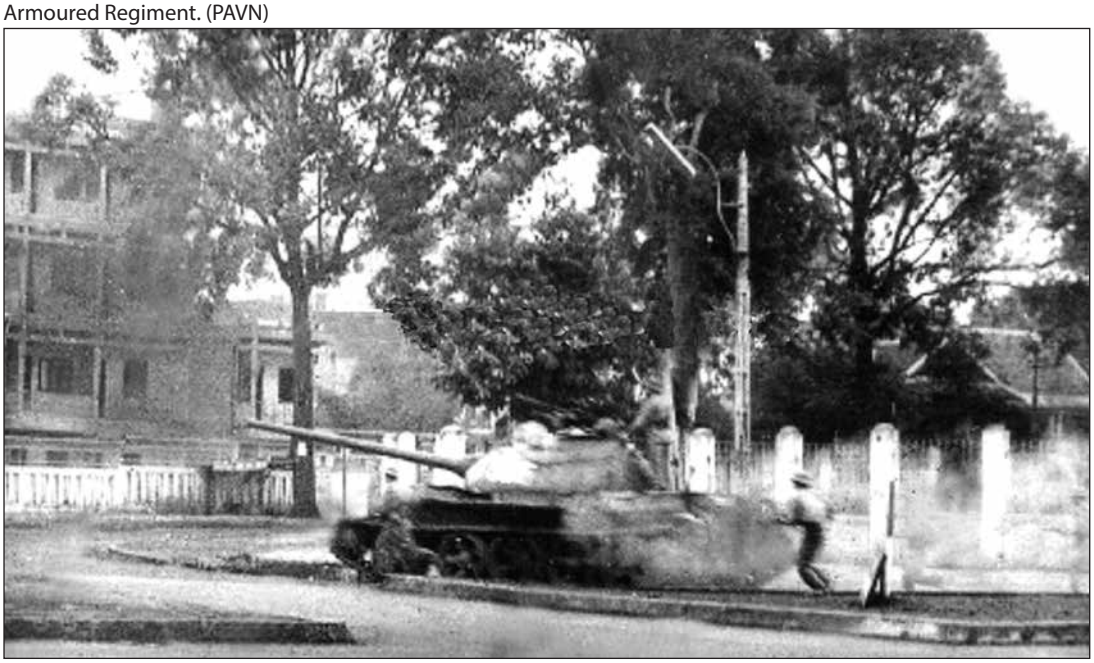
Tankers of the PAVN 273rd Armoured Regiment receive final instructions before assaulting Ban Me Thuot. In the background are PT-76 and T-34/85 tanks. (PAVN)

disembarked at Phu Cat AB. The VNAF was also ordered to fly reconnaissance sorties around the town and along the Srepok River. Phu promised to fly in the rest of the 23rd Division if the city was attacked. He had barely left for Pleiku when the North Vietnamese units began their night march towards their attack positions.

By 0245 hours on 10 March, the assault sappers were in position, having infiltrated the city. The 1st, 9th and 18th Assault Sapper Companies were near the fences of the airport, while another company reached the six-way crossroads. At 0300 hours, several batteries of 107mm and 132mm MRLs opened fire with heavy mortars against Ban Me Thuot, while the sappers swarmed into the city's airfield, occupying part of it in the face of strong resistance from RF and VNAF security troops. They destroyed one CH-47A, one O-1F and 10 UH-1Hs, but three damaged Huey helicopters could fly out. Meanwhile, the 2nd Assault Sapper Company attacked the Mai Hac De supply depot, which with 64 warehouses and open-air dumps, held the largest ARVN ammunition supply in the Highlands. After a sharp firefight, the depot was captured by 0600 hours. But the main sapper thrust was directed at the Phung Duc airfield about 8km east of the city. This military area also included the base camps of the ARVN 53rd and 44th Regiments. The 3rd Battalion of the 53rd Regiment was holding the regiment's well-fortified base, while the 44th Regiment's base was manned only by support and administrative troops. Two PAVN assault sapper battalions would assault this critical area. The elite 27th Attack Sapper Battalion would attack the 44th Regiment camp and the airfield command centre, while the 401st Assault Sapper Battalion attacked the 53rd Regiment camp. By 0700 hours, the 44th Regiment base

T-54s of the PAVN 2nd Armoured Battalion, 273rd Armoured Regiment, enter Ban Me Thuot on its northwest sector in support of the PAVN 316th Division. (PAVN)

The PAVN 174th Regiment attack the Mai Hac De ammunition depot, the biggest depot of the South Vietnamese in the Central Highlands. The regiment was supported by T-54s and PT-76s of the 2nd Armoured Battalion, 273rd Armoured Regiment. (PAVN)



The main six-way intersection at Ban Me Thuot was at first secured by infiltrated Dac Cong shock troops. They were joined at dawn on 10 March by the PAVN 95B Regiment and tanks of the 2nd Armoured Battalion. (PAVN)

and the airbase command centre were taken. But all the assaults carried out against the 53rd's camp were pushed back. The ARVN regulars were supported by 105mm howitzers, and as dawn broke by VNAF fighter-bombers which flew 80 attack sorties until midday. The 27th Attack Sapper Battalion came in support but fared no better, its commander being killed.

As soon as the sappers attacked, the engineer troops began to direct the crossing of tanks and artillery over the 250m-wide Srepok River. Another bridge was built across the Ea Tam River. Some confusion occurred in the order of crossing, causing delays. With daylight coming, PAVN artillery began a concentrated barrage of 48 85mm, 105mm, 122mm and 130mm guns at 0700 hours.

At the six-way crossroad, the worried sappers awaited the arrival of the 95B Regiment as they were counterattacked by an RF company supported by M113s. The regiment, supported by the T-54s of the 4th Armoured Company, was still on its way, having to force its passage at Hill 491 and Bua Chua village. Its vanguard, the 5th Battalion, arrived at around 0730 hours and had to repel repeated ARVN counterattacks for hours, and at one time was driven out. The T-54s tried to recapture the position but, without infantry support, pulled back. Finally, the crossroad was retaken by early afternoon when the T-34/85s and T-54s knocked out four M113s that were defending it. At least five tanks had been lost so far. Thereafter, the 95B Regiment moved to clear out the southern part of the city, and by 1530 hours they reached the provincial command post and provincial governor's residence, forcing Colonel Nguyen Cong Luat to seek asylum in the command post of the 23rd Division. By nightfall, all resistance there was eliminated. Meanwhile, the tanks of the 4th Company had been redirected towards the city's airfield to clear out the remaining pockets of resistance.

On the northwest sector, the 148th Regiment was in place at 0630 hours to attack the 8th ACS base, but the supporting tanks of the 8th Company of the 2nd Armoured Battalion had become lost,

The city airfield of Ban Me Thuot, after being attacked by Dac Cong sappers, was finally occupied by the PAVN 95B Regiment. (PAVN)

several T-54s bogged down in mud. At daybreak, caught exposed in a cemetery, the unit suffered heavy losses due to artillery and air strikes. It was not until 1000 hours that the tanks and the 85mm field guns arrived to resume the attack. By 1330 hours, the 8th ACS compound and the base of the 45th Regiment were taken. A last pocket of resistance at the Bo De pagoda was eliminated. The 148th Regiment then linked up with the 95B Regiment at the six-way crossroad to combine their efforts to attack the provincial headquarters.

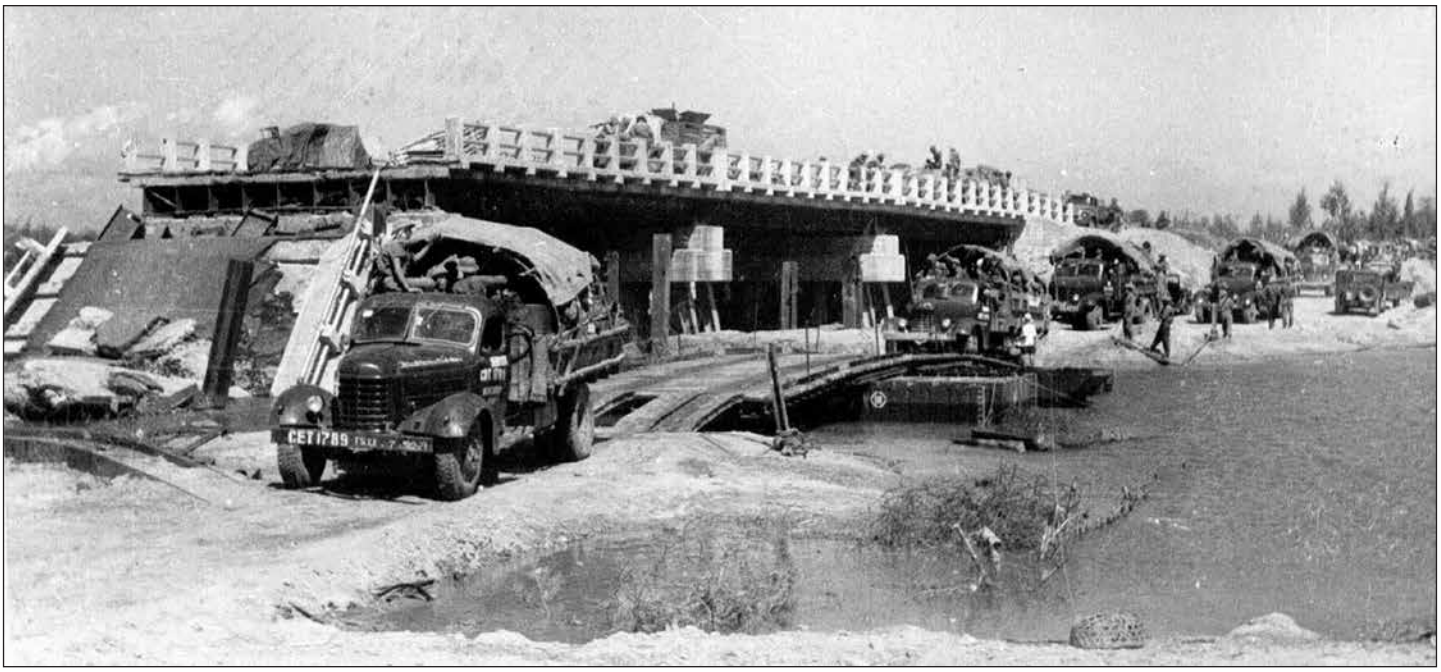
The armour and artillery assigned to the south-western column also failed to arrive on time, caught in a traffic jam at the Srepok River bridge. The 174th Regiment nevertheless captured a ridge near the Mai Hac De ammunition depot to ensure that the 10th Division's armour had unimpeded access along Route 429. By mid-morning, the armoured units finally caught up at the military hospital. Fiercely bombed by the VNAF, they remained there for the rest of the day. The motorised column helped to reassert control of the ammunition depot. The sappers there had been counterattacked by the RF 242nd Battalion with M113s and had blown up several ammunition pits that destroyed 10,000 105mm artillery shells to block their attackers. The PAVN 179th Regiment attempted a rescue, but one of its companies was caught exposed at the sports ground and nearly annihilated. Only a counterattack by the T-54s and PT-76s of the 2nd Armoured Battalion saved the situation.

In the western sector, the 24th Regiment of the 10th Division sped down Route 429, motored past the Mai Hac De depot and penetrated the housing compound for ARVN enlisted families, near the 23rd Division headquarters. The column then triumphantly reported that it had taken the headquarters. However, General Thao's intelligence staff disagreed, insisting that it was still monitoring transmission from the command post. The 24th Regiment had actually mistaken the medical and communications compound for the 23rd's headquarters. It was around noon before the push against the command post resumed, this time with the south-eastern prong of the 316th Division, supported by T-34/85 and T-54 tanks. However, the attack was again foiled, with three tanks destroyed, the South Vietnamese counterattacking with M41s and M113s in support.

When Phu was informed of the attack against Ban Me Thuot, he still believed that the assault was carried out only by the PAVN 320th Division. He stubbornly clung to his belief that the attack was a diversion for an assault against Gia Nghia, southwest of the city, to be followed by a main thrust against Pleiku. Consequently, he believed it would suffice to resist for just two to three days before the enemy would withdraw. He ordered the 21st Ranger Group to depart Dat Ly and retake the lost positions inside the city. But the two Rangers battalions, without artillery or armour support, could only advance cautiously through the massive PAVN motorised columns and did not arrive until nightfall, but were unable to break through, so they retreated towards the eastern side of the city. They regrouped there in a coffee plantation with various survivors of the 1st Battalion, 53rd Regiment, and some RF/PF troops. Meanwhile, the two RF battalions that had landed at Phu Cat AB were ordered to be flown into Ban Me Thuot as additional reinforcements, but while approaching the city, due to heavy AA fire, the helicopters were diverted to Buon Ho.

By the night of 10 March, the North Vietnamese had a firm hold on the centre of Ban Me Thuot. General Thao was elated. Despite scattered ARVN pockets of resistance east, west and south of the city, his gamble had worked exceedingly well, his mad dash into the city having succeeded beyond expectation. The heaviest combat continued around the 53rd Regiment's camp, east of the city. It was the best protected, with thick concrete and earthen walls, pillboxes and minefields. Throughout the night and during the next eight successive nights, the base, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Vo An, held out, thanks largely to VNAF AC-119 gunships and C-130As used as bombers.

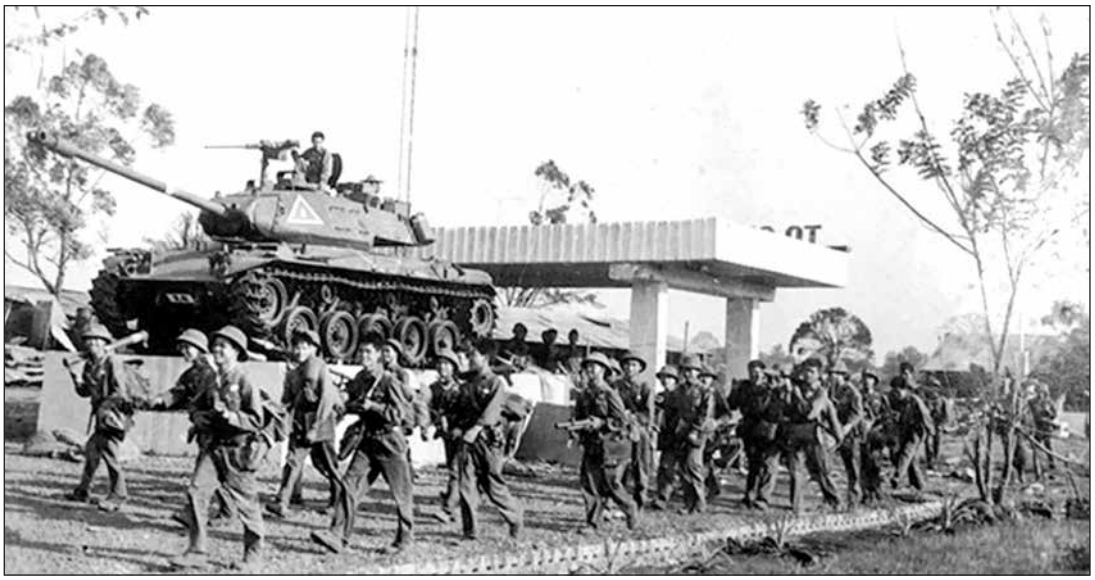
On 11 March, the North Vietnamese resumed the assault against the 23rd Division HQ, which was attacked by the 95B Regiment, supported by the 2nd Armoured Battalion, after a two-hour artillery barrage. The first assault was pushed back, with two T-54s destroyed by the M41s. But another attack took place at around 1000 hours and gained a foothold inside the base, and a group of 10 T-54s was heading towards the 23rd Division command post. Inside the position, taking a major risk, Colonel Vu The Quang asked a flight of VNAF A-37Bs to attack them. They destroyed three tanks but a 500lb bomb hit the communication centre. One hour later, the T-54s were firing at point-blank range against the main HQ bunker. Quang, as well the provincial chief, Colonel Nguyen Cong Luat, decided to escape with the survivors, but both were taken prisoner. Another breakthrough with trucks, two M113s and two M41s was blocked by the PAVN T-54s of the 9th Tank Company and wiped out. Ban Me Thuot was now fully occupied at a cost of more than 400 killed and 13 tanks. Many of the casualties were inflicted by the VNAF, which flew 196 tactical sorties in two days, losing three A-37Bs and two UH-1H gunships shot down. The North Vietnamese immediately searched the city, making selected arrests, including foreigners. Among those detained were the US Consul General's provincial representative, Paul Struharic, and two members of the ICCS (the International Commission of Control and Supervision, set up by the Paris Peace Accords in 1973 to monitor the ceasefire in Vietnam), one Iranian and one Indonesian officer.



The PAVN 316th Division column advancing on the southeast Ban Me Thuot sector was impeded on its march by a destroyed bridge. However, engineers quickly laid down a pontoon bridge, allowing the column to resume its advance. The trucks here are Chinese-built CA-10s. (PAVN)

The whole battlefield of Ban Me Thuot was protected against air attacks by no less than three anti-aircraft artillery regiments. A PAVN AT-L artillery tractor, towing an S-60 57mm AA gun, is speeding forwards to catch up with the tanks and trucks that converged on the city. (PAVN)

A pair of A-37Bs of the 524th Fighter Squadron, 92nd Wing, based at Phan Rang AB, departing for a new attack mission at Ban Me Thuot. They operated from Nha Trang AB to cut short the distance to the battlefield. In the background are an Air Vietnam DC-3 and a B-26K used as a ground instructional airframe by the VNAF Air Academy which was based there. (Pham Quang Khiem Collection)



By the afternoon of 10 March, the North Vietnamese had nearly occupied the whole of Ban Me Thuot city. PAVN 148th Regiment troops entered the 8th ACS base, not far from the provincial governor's house. (PAVN)

General Thao now ordered his men to "blossom the lotus", to attack from within Ban Me Thuot the outer perimeter defensive positions. During the next four days, five PAVN regiments, supported by the 1st Armoured Battalion, attacked and occupied the rest of Phung Duc airfield, the 45th Regiment and the local training camps, and almost a dozen village strongpoints surrounding the city. On 12 March, the PAVN 24th Regiment of the 10th Division, with a tank company, occupied the 45th Regiment and the training camps, capturing 12 105mm howitzers. In the afternoon, the PAVN 174th Regiment secured the eastern entrance to the city and its bridge. In the north, the PAVN 9th Regiment, 320th Division, attacked and seized the district town of Buon Ho and the villages of Chu Bao and Dat Ly. On 13 March, the communists occupied Chu Son, Chu Nga and Ban Don, as well as the town of Hoa Binh. On 14 March, the North Vietnamese encountered strong resistance from South Vietnamese militia in the villages of Chi Lang, Chau Song and Tinh Thuong, and Base Camp 53. They were mostly former refugee centres that accommodated Catholics from North Vietnam who fled south after the partition of the country in 1954. Only the 53rd Regiment base still held out, supported by the VNAF and supplies dropped by parachutes.

One of the rare photographs from the South Vietnamese side of the battle for Ban Me Thuot that has survived show this PAVN T-54 tank destroyed on the outskirts of the city. The North Vietnamese lost 13 tanks in the first two days of fighting. (ARVN)

Meanwhile, on 11 March, ARVN II Corps intelligence deciphered enemy radio communications indicating that the 316th Division was also taking part in the battle. The news sent shock waves up the chain of command and reached the JGS and President Thieu in Saigon. It was now clear that Hanoi had committed its central reserve force units for a wider-than-expected offensive. Phu was ordered to hold Ban Me Thuot at any cost to fix there the PAVN's committed divisions. Instead of attacking down Route 14 with available forces in Pleiku and trying to break through the Thuan Man and Buon Ho roadblocks, with the powerful 2nd Armoured Brigade in the vanguard, he decided to deploy the two remaining regiments of the 23rd Division by helicopter east of the town. They were to coordinate with the remaining battalion of the 53rd Regiment and the 21st Ranger Group to constitute two attack groups. They would establish a firm foothold east of the city while a third attack group drove from the coast along Route 21 through the M'Drak pass to link up with them. The latter task force would comprise the 40th Regiment, 22nd Division, beefed up with five RF battalions and an M113 troop. All would have maximum air support. One wonders how such a force, representing a depleted division, without tank support and little artillery, could prevail against a whole PAVN army corps. But the plan was accepted by President Thieu, who promised additional VNAF assets as well as the 7th Ranger Group from the central reserve to replace the departing regiments of the 23rd Division in Pleiku.

On the morning of 12 March, the ARVN 45th Regiment began boarding some 90 helicopters at Pleiku to fly to Hill 581, the main

By the evening of 10 March, apart from some isolated pockets of resistance, the North Vietnamese gamble had worked exceedingly well, and their mad dash into Ban Me Thuot had succeeded beyond expectations. These Chinese-built CA-30 'Liberation' trucks of the PAVN 316th Division are rolling down the streets of the heavily damaged city centre. (PAVN)

high ground between Route 21 and Phung Duc airfield. Hill 581, 1.7km east of their surrounded comrades at the 53rd Regiment base, provided a dominant position from which to launch a counterattack. The unit linked up with the nearby 21st Ranger Group to expand its defensive perimeter. General Phu supervised the airlift in a small U-17 liaison plane, whose pilots dodged the flak. However, due to maintenance problems with the CH-47As, with only six helicopters available, the entire lift was not completed until late afternoon the next day, 13 March, with two battalions inserted. Meanwhile, the VNAF transports had begun to fly in the 7th Ranger Group from Saigon, allowing the redeployment of the 44th Regiment towards Ban Me Thuot. The helicopter lift from Pleiku resumed on 14 March, with four additional UH-1H helicopter squadrons and four CH-47As provided by III and IV Army Corps to lift the 44th Regiment and the remaining battalion of the 45th Regiment. Some three battalions, regimental support elements, a battery of 105mm howitzers and the tactical headquarters of the 23rd Division were thus landed at Phuoc An, a town 30km further to the east of Ban Me Thuot on Route 21.

On 11 March, the PAVN 95B Regiment, supported by the 2nd Armoured Battalion, took the ARVN 23rd Division HQ after fierce resistance by the South Vietnamese. (PAVN)

A T-54 tank commander used a loudspeaker to call for the surrender of the stubborn ARVN 53rd Regiment camp's defenders, east of the city. Although surrounded and outnumbered, they held their positions for eight days before breaking out in small groups. (PAVN)

All these developments did not surprise General Thao, who had predicted such moves. He had already redeployed the PAVN 10th Division, with the 3rd Armoured Battalion, east of Ban Me Thuot to face any such airborne counterattack. When the 45th Regiment tried to link up with the 53rd Regiment base, it was immediately pinned down by artillery fire. The South Vietnamese then faced an attack by seven T-54s and 15 SU-100s that pushed them back to their starting line. The situation was stabilised when VNAF A-37Bs and F-5s intervened, flying 81 sorties. But after three more hours of fighting, the North Vietnamese took over Hill 581 and captured four 105mm howitzers. The ARVN soldiers began sneaking away to find their families in the wave of humanity moving along Route 21. The commander of the 23rd Division also arranged to clear a landing spot at the former training camp to pick up his family by helicopter. This was the first manifestation of the 'family syndrome', wherein ARVN soldiers and officers deserted their posts to find their loved ones.

On 15 March, the 44th Regiment moved down Route 21, again trying to link up with the defenders at the 53rd Regiment base but was stopped short by the PAVN 10th Division at the Ea Nhiae River, 10km short of its target. The next day, the North Vietnamese counterattacked, deploying two regiments, supported by the 3rd Armoured Battalion. Throughout the day, the South Vietnamese fought stubbornly, with excellent VNAF air support that destroyed half a dozen tanks. The last battalion of the 44th Regiment was also landed by helicopter. On 17 March, the PAVN 10th Division resumed its attack, led by the

Dac Cong of the 198th Assault Sapper Regiment fought to keep a foothold inside the ARVN 53rd Regiment camp. It took a week for the North Vietnamese to overwhelm this position. (PAVN)

8th Battalion of the 66th Regiment mounted on trucks, supported by T-54s of the 5th Company and K-63s of the 3rd Company. The rest of the 3rd Armoured Battalion was held in reserve to exploit any breaches in the enemy defensive lines. The 'deep penetration' group finally broke through by early afternoon at the Nong Trai crossroad, after two unsuccessful assaults. The rest of the PAVN 10th Division poured into Phuoc An, 8km further east, with 30 T-54s and SU-100s. The North Vietnamese captured six 105mm howitzers and an intact UH-1H helicopter there, but several tanks had been destroyed by the VNAF. The ARVN 23rd Division commander, Brigadier General Le Trung Tuong, was slightly wounded in the face when his helicopter took off and flew to Nha Trang to be hospitalised. A furious Phu relieved him of his command and nominated Colonel Le Huu Duc in his place.

After a pause, on 18 March, the PAVN 10th Division continued to roll down Route 21 and attacked what remained of the 44th Regiment and three RF battalions entrenched around Krong Buk village. VNAF A-37Bs destroyed the nearby bridge, but some PT-76s swam across the river to attack the enemy positions from behind. The survivors pulled back further east to the entrance of M'Drak pass at Khanh Duong. In just five days, the counteroffensive carried out by the 23rd Division was shattered. On 21 March, the survivors were flown out towards the relative security of Cam Ranh Bay harbour, their place being taken by the 40th Regiment, 22nd Division.

In a bid to finally overwhelm the stubborn defenders at the 53rd Regiment base, the North Vietnamese attacked it again on 14 March with the 149th Regiment of the 316th Division and six T-54s but they were pinned down on the helicopter landing area, one tank being destroyed. Another assault at sunset again failed, the tanks being lost in night fighting. Another attempt the next day resulted in further losses with no ground gained. On 16 March, it was decided to further reinforce the attacking force with the 66th Regiment of the 10th Division and a tank company. However, the attackers were still unable to breach the earthen walls and lost two more tanks. By dawn of 17 March, PAVN engineers eventually blasted a path through the defences. The gallant defenders, comprising around 100 survivors, then began a tortuous withdrawal eastward. They did not see any reason to continue clinging to their position to preserve a springboard for a counterattack to retake Ban Me Thuot, since dramatic developments were taking place further north, with the decision to evacuate the whole Central Highlands.

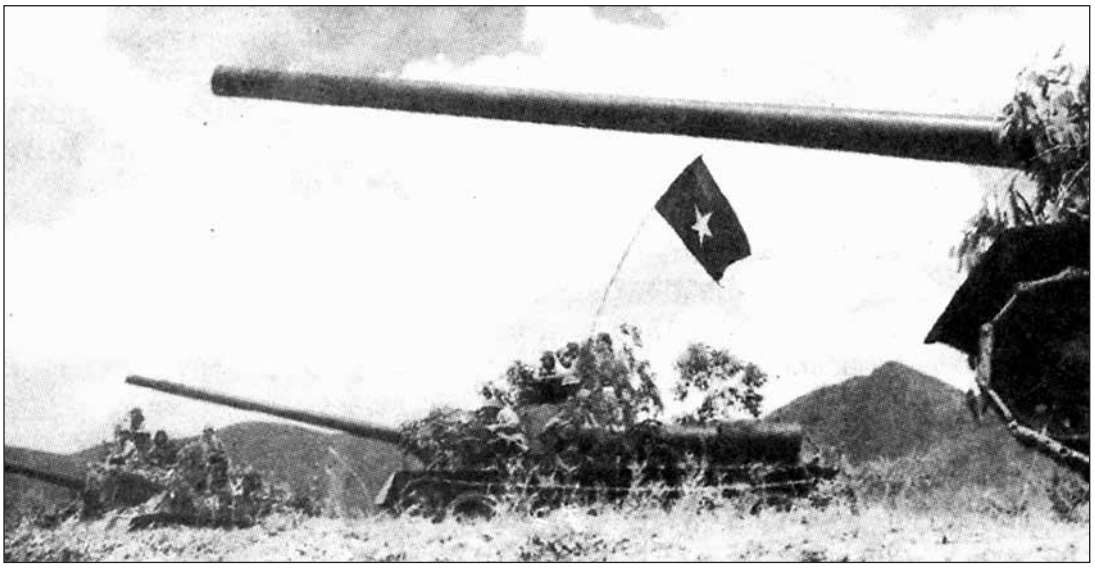
On the morning of 12 March, the ARVN 45th Regiment, 23rd Division, began boarding some 90 helicopters at Pleiku to fly to Hill 581 east of Ban Me Thuot, 1.7km from their surrounded comrades at the 53rd Regiment base. (US Army)

The Cam Ranh Bay meeting

On 11 March, a Politburo special meeting took place in Hanoi to review the rapid collapse of Ban Me Thuot. Aggressive as ever, Party Secretary General Le Duan asked why things could not be accelerated more; now that practically all the southern portion of Route 14 had been cleared out, was it possible to wheel down the troops around Ban Me Thuot to join forces with those of B2 Front under General Tran Van Tra to attack Saigon directly? Since the earliest days of the Central Cell's planning,

the main target had always been Saigon, known as 'Plan One'. But General Van Tien Dung, in the field, tempered him by indicating that he was expecting an ARVN counteroffensive. When the ARVN 23rd Division counterattack failed, Dung again recommended to postpone the move south. He first wanted to clear out the threat represented by the remaining ARVN II Corps forces on his lines of communications. He also cautioned that an offensive against Saigon should be carefully planned, because the ARVN III Corps was far better prepared to withstand such an eventuality. If entrenched and well prepared, as the example of the 53rd Regiment base had shown, the ARVN could offer very fierce resistance. Both Dung and the Politburo now guessed what the remaining ARVN forces in the Central Highlands would do next. They thought it likely they would bunker down inside the Pleiku and Kontum enclaves. They might also evacuate the whole area altogether, but that seemed improbable since all the routes to the coastal area had been severed. Whatever the case, Giap agreed with Dung to redirect their forces to attack Pleiku and isolate Kontum, which would be taken later.

The troops landed by helicopter were immediately launched in an attack to join up with the besieged 53rd Regiment base but could not advance far due to a North Vietnamese counterattack with tanks and artillery. (US Army)



A heliborne attack by the ARVN 23rd Division to relieve Ban Me Thuot was a dismal failure. The two inserted regiments were pushed back down Route 21 to the entrance of M'Drak pass. They were incessantly attacked and pursued by the PAVN 10th Division, supported by the 3rd Armoured Battalion and the 95th Self-Propelled Artillery Battalion with its SU-100s, shown here. (PAVN)

On the same day that the Politburo met in Hanoi, President Thieu convened an urgent meeting with his top three military advisors. Attending were General Cao Van Vien, the head of the JGS, Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem and Lieutenant General Dang Van Quang, Thieu's long-time aide for National Security Affairs. They reviewed the serious situation unfolding in the Central Highlands, as well as the increased enemy attacks throughout the country to pin down the ARVN reserves. Particularly preoccupying were the attacks against Xuan Loc and Tay Ninh, near Saigon. Changing radically his previous stance, the South Vietnamese president now openly expressed that it would not be feasible to defend all their territory. With little hope for the reintroduction of American military power, or even a renewal of military aid, a drastic consolidation of units and supplies seemed the best chance for survival. Thieu was forced to accept the idea to redeploy their forces to defend the most populous and economically significant parts of the country. Those areas were the heartland of South Vietnam, from the southern portion of II Corps' area, a line stretching across the country from Ban Me Thuot to Tuy Hoa on the coast, to the southern tip of the Mekong Delta. That was roughly the former Cochin China, considered as truly 'southern' by the Vietnamese. There was a longstanding and distinct cultural identity among the people of this region which Thieu hoped to rally and galvanise against the northern invaders. Thieu would abandon much of I Corps' area, although he wanted to hold Da Nang as an enclave for a future counterattack. He also wanted to defend Hue if possible but felt it would be difficult to hold. Accordingly, it was imperative to recapture Ban Me Thuot, which anchored the north-western end of Thieu's bisected South Vietnam. He rightly saw that if the communists held the city, they could threaten Saigon from three directions: from Dalat in the north, Nha Trang in the east and Tay Ninh in the west. For that reason, it would be necessary to retrieve his isolated and vulnerable troops in the northern Central Highlands. Then, after recapturing Ban Me Thuot, if the circumstances would allow it, they would move against Pleiku and Kontum. Thieu named his strategy 'Light at the top, heavy at the bottom'. The president ordered everyone to keep his decision

secret, even from the Americans. Thieu also needed to reconstitute a strategic reserve, so he ordered the Airborne Division from I Corps to pull back to Saigon. His alarmed I Corps commander, Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, immediately requested an audience for the next day, hoping that Thieu would rescind his decision, but to no avail. Thieu remained firm and permitted him only a gradual pulling-out of the unit from its defensive lines west of Da Nang by air and sea. In its place, he would receive the last of South Vietnam's reserve, the newly constituted 4th Marine Brigade. The stunned Truong, who had fought so hard to conserve the I Corps area for the last two-and-a-half years, was ordered to await further development and told that he would likely have to regroup all his forces around Da Nang.

On 13 March, General Phu received a telephone call from Thieu's chief of staff: Phu was to meet the president at Cam Ranh Bay the next morning. It would be the most important meeting of the war. Phu was instructed of the new strategic redeployment and was asked to devise a plan to withdraw his forces in the northern Central Highlands within three days, to regroup them on the coast, then counterattack to retake Ban Me Thuot. Phu had little choice left on the route to be taken. The most direct, Route 19, was now interdicted in two places. With a concerted effort from both ends, it would be possible to clear the roadblocks, but only at considerable effort. Furthermore, the North Vietnamese divisions at Ban Me Thuot could join up and shatter the whole scheme. Phu realised that a successful withdrawal would require surprise. He therefore proposed the disused Route 7B, the only highway out of the Highlands still open. This road branches off from Route 14 south of Pleiku, passes through Cheo Reo, then turns east and ends on the coast at Thuy Hoa. From there, Phu's soldiers would move south on Route 1 to Route 21, and then west to Ban Me Thuot. The total distance from Pleiku to Thuy Hoa is 248km, and from Thuy Hoa to Ban Me Thuot another 235km. His forces would consequently have to march nearly 485km just to enter battle. Making matters worse, only part of Route 7B was fully passable to traffic. After Cheo Reo, it was 128km of narrow, extremely rough road to the coast. Major stretches snaked through thick jungle mountains. Washouts, steep passes and ruined culverts over many streams added further problems. There were 17 bridges on this section, all too weak to support armoured units. More significantly, the retreating column would have to cross the sizeable Ba River twice, and a floating bridge would have to be built to enable the tanks to cross. From there, another pontoon bridge had to be laid near the village of Phu Tuc. And that was the easy part. The final 25km stretch of road, from Cung Son to Thuy Hoa, had been heavily mined years earlier by South Korean forces and the communists. The only way around the minefields, a bridge that branched off from Route 7B, crossed the Ba River and linked up with Local Route 436 to Thuy Hoa, had been destroyed long ago. To reach the coast, Phu's troops would have to build another floating bridge.

Phu, however, claimed the road was in better shape than was generally believed. Since it was nearing the end of the dry season, he reasoned that the water in many streams would be low, so they could be easily forded. He also stated that it would not be necessary to build the third bridge at Cung Son. He declared that if they lined the river bottom with steel planks from the local airfields' runways, his vehicles could drive across the river to join with Local Route 436. Phu received no advice from the generals accompanying Thieu. Incredible as it was, the JGS that tentatively tried to sound out Thieu in making this major redeployment of forces, had not studied any detailed plans. When the president brushed aside their suggestions, none tried to push their case further, fearing to be accused of defeatism. Here, the fragmented, coup-fearing South Vietnamese high command apparatus revealed all its weaknesses. Contrary to their enemy's

The commander of the ARVN II Corps in 1975 was Major General Pham Van Phu, considered to be one of the most courageous South Vietnamese officers. As a young airborne officer, he fought at Dien Bien Phu with the French and was taken prisoner by the communists. But with limited means, as well as his lack of training and experience in directing an army corps, his tactical choices would prove disastrous. He committed suicide when the North Vietnamese entered Saigon. (ARVN)

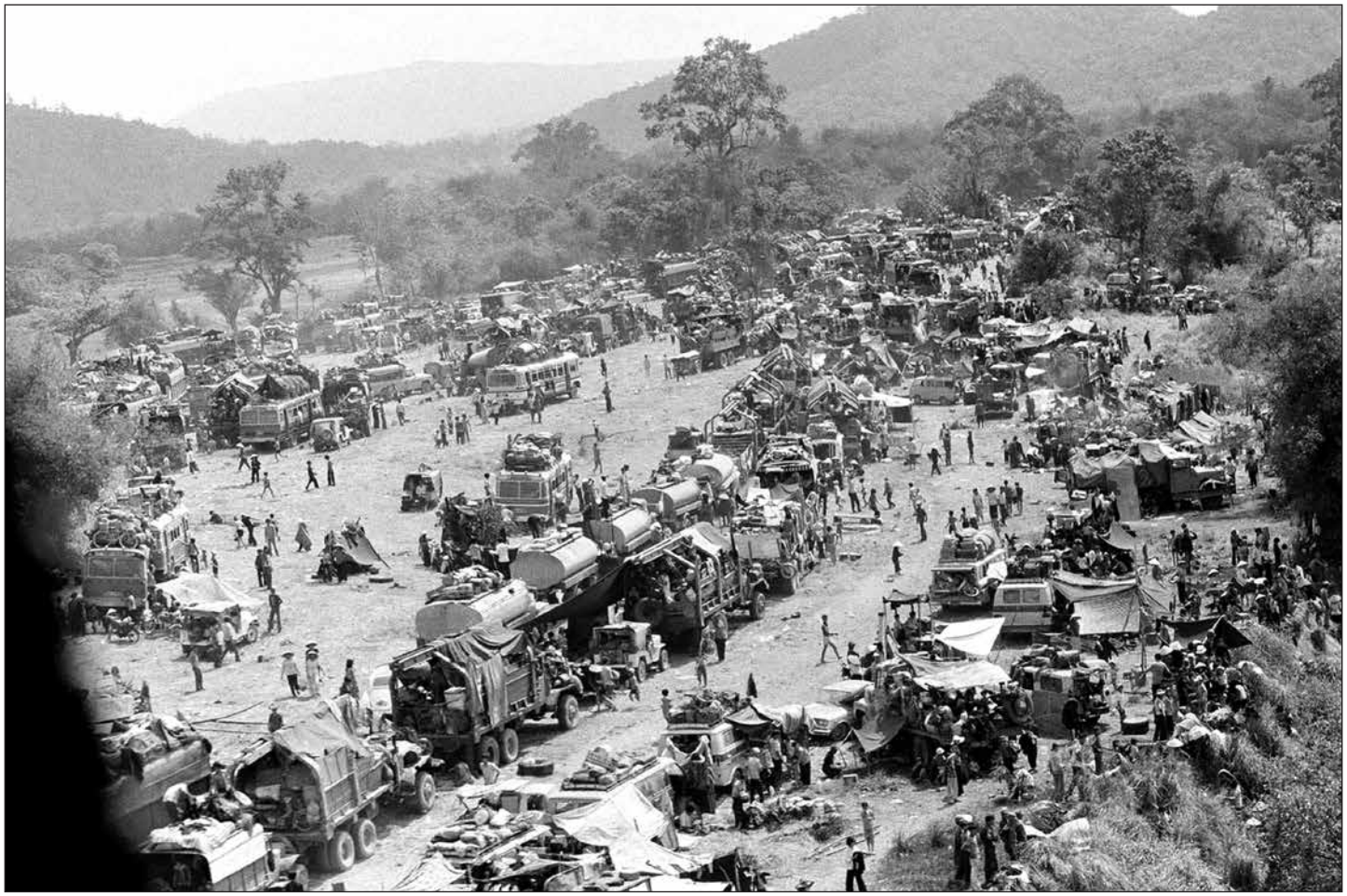
centralised and disciplined command structure, which meticulously planned and war-gamed every possible ARVN move, nothing of this sort existed in Saigon. Each corps commander dealt directly with the president, and no national coordination existed, nor inter-service cooperation. The VNAF commander, Lieutenant General Tran Van Minh, was informed of the Central Highlands evacuation only when the commander of the 6th Air Division at Pleiku, Brigadier General Pham Ngoc Sang, requested additional transport aircraft from him to fulfil the scheme! Phu only asked the JGS for additional river-crossing equipment. Closing the meeting, Phu made one final request, pleading for Colonel Pham Duy Tat, the II Corps Ranger commander, to be promoted to brigadier general and to lead the retreating column. Thieu reluctantly accepted. Phu, as an airborne officer, favoured a 'special forces' officer, as he believed that only a 'shock troops' commander could act decisively in grave circumstances. Again, his lack of military education to command an entire army corps was badly felt. Instead of planning a phased withdrawal, by using his artillery and armour to screen or to launch diversionary attacks, allowing the main withdrawing convoys to pass through, he was focused only on secrecy and speed of manoeuvre. No detailed instructions were given; the operation was prepared only in outline with verbal orders. Worse, only the staff officers and commanders were told of the plan. The local provincial governors and the regional troops would not be informed. They would be left behind to fight while the regular forces withdrew. Even more incredibly, neither Phu nor Thieu had envisaged that when the troops withdrew, they would be joined by a mass of civilians fleeing the arrival of communist forces. Time and again during the 1972 campaign, ARVN withdrawals had been impeded by columns of refugees on foot.

9
THE ROAD OF BLOOD AND TEARS

Back in Pleiku, Phu summoned his staff, which ludicrously only learnt then of the decision. Some preferred to mobilise all available forces to clear Route 19 instead. They argued that the road was in very good shape, and the distance between Pleiku and the coast was shorter, being only 150km. By concentrating the five available Ranger groups with the 2nd Armoured Brigade at one end, and the 22nd Division at the other, buttressed with Regional Forces, it would be possible to pass through. But Phu remained firm. Each involved unit would be warned only an hour in advance. He then redeployed most of the II Corps Staff to Nha Trang, where he settled in to plan the counteroffensive against Ban Me Thuot instead of leading the complex and difficult withdrawal operation himself. He added more confusion when he gave the battlefield command to the newly promoted Brigadier General Tat, but confirmed Brigadier General Tran Van Cam, the II Corps deputy of operations, as 'supervisor' of the withdrawal. Refusing to be put under the command of his former subordinate, Tran Van Cam settled in Thuy Hoa to await the arrival of the exiting columns. A light corps headquarters under Brigadier General Tat would follow the convoys and was first established at Cheo Reo, with Colonel Nguyen Van Dong, CO of the 2nd Armoured Brigade, and Colonel Le Khac Ly, the II Corps chief of staff, acting as its deputies. Complex and unclear hierarchical lines and personal enmities among senior officers soon led to a total breakdown of the command structure.

Colonel Ly quickly sketched a withdrawal schedule, with the 20th Engineer Group of Lieutenant Colonel Ngo Le Tinh in the vanguard, opening the way, repairing and building bridges. The main body was scheduled to move over a four-day period, beginning on 16 March. That implied the displacement of five Ranger groups, the 2nd Armoured Brigade (21st Tank Squadron, 3rd and 19th Cavalry Squadrons) and six artillery battalions (three with 105mm howitzers, two with 155mm howitzers and one with M107 175mm SP guns), representing thousands of vehicles, 54 M48 and 54 M41 tanks, and over 100 M113 APCs and V100 armoured cars. Each truck echelon was to be protected by a troop of M48 Pattons. As much as possible, stores also had to be evacuated, including 20,000 tons of Army and VNAF ammunitions, a 45-day supply of fuel and 60 days of rations for 30,000 troops. Security along the road would be assured by the local forces of Phu Bon and Phu Yen Provinces, which was an unrealistic prospect since their governors had not been warned.

Shortly after the engineers moved out, the 23rd Ranger Group set off to secure Cheo Reo on 15 March. Once in place, one battalion would occupy the Chu Pa ridgeline. Then the first element, made



General Phu hoped to catch the North Vietnamese by surprise by using the disused Route 7B to evacuate his regular units based in Kontum and Pleiku. But he badly overestimated his ability to repair and rebuild the route quickly enough to allow the passage of the convoys. A huge traffic jam was soon created in the narrow valley of Cheo Reo, with many vehicles waiting there for four days for the completion of the first floating bridge over the Ba River. (ARVN)

Incredibly, President Thieu did not take into count the fact that while the troops were withdrawing, they would be followed by masses of civilians trying to escape the arrival of communist forces. This occurred systematically during the 1972 campaign, each time impeding the progress of the military convoys. It was estimated that some 300,000 civilians joined the exodus along Route 7B. (Nguyen Van Khiem Collection)

up of the 6th Ranger Group and a troop of M113s, departed Pleiku the next day and moved to Cung Son. The 6th Rangers would secure the road from Phu Tuc to Cung Son and provide security for the engineers building the second, bigger bridge at Cung Son. The second element would depart early on 17 March. It consisted of the II Corps light headquarters, the 4th Ranger Group, armour and artillery, and the remaining battalion of the 44th Regiment. The third element, comprising the 7th, 22nd and 25th Ranger Groups, would set out on 18 March. Once everyone else had passed through Cheo Reo, the 23rd Rangers would follow.

At first it seemed that the daring plan of Phu had succeeded; the North Vietnamese did not react when the engineers and Rangers went to Cheo Reo on 15 March. The PAVN 320th Division, in charge of this sector, believed it was a local ARVN reinforcement to prepare the place as a possible springboard for a future counterattack against Ban Me Thuot. Its commander, Senior Colonel Kim Tuan, also believed that the neglected Route 7B could not be used for a massive withdrawal. But hiding the withdrawal of the South Vietnamese civilians was more difficult. On 16 March, when the troops began to leave Kontum and pulled back towards Pleiku, the inhabitants panicked and streamed back in their wake. The 6th Ranger Group was the first to be pulled out the previous day. It was followed by the 22nd and 23rd Ranger Groups. Seeing the withdrawal, the Kontum Province chief joined the stream of traffic but was captured in an ambush at the Chu Pao pass. Around Pleiku, the 25th Ranger Group began disengaging from Thanh An, while the 4th Rangers were also pulling back from the Route 19 sector. The PAVN 968th Division moved in and caught the 25th Rangers in the open, practically destroying the formation. As the day passed, seeing the continuous groups of departing troops, the people also began to flee Pleiku, heading south in every type of vehicle possible or on foot. Others stormed the airbase, trying to embark on any civilian or military planes available. Many troops also embarked their families on the military trucks instead of supplies, and these stores were now blown so as not to be taken by the enemy. Police and Regional troops joined the exodus or deserted, and disorder broke out in the city, with scenes of looting. By the evening and throughout the night, the long column of refugees continued to stream along Route 14. By dawn, many – particularly the elderly and children – had fallen behind due to exhaustion and lack of water before reaching Cheo Reo. There, Colonel Dong ordered the 6th Ranger Group to continue east and pass Phu Tuc to the Ca Lui Regional Force outpost in order to protect the engineers strengthening the bridge at Phu Tuc. Contradictory orders led to the attached M113 troop continuing to Cung Son, where it sat for several days, doing nothing, awaiting further orders.

By the evening of 16 March, much of the first element had moved south of Cheo Reo, but at dawn, most of the heavy equipment that arrived from Pleiku was stranded there, still waiting for the engineers to install a heavier floating bridge to allow the crossing of the tanks and guns. On 17 March, a final massive convoy left Pleiku, the 7th Ranger Group joining the rear of the column as it passed by on Route 14. The 4th Rangers fell in behind them. The 22nd Rangers, who had been delayed at Kontum due to a lack of trucks, acted as the rearguard. The few remaining engineers prepared demolition charges to destroy the command bunkers at the II Corps headquarters, while the VNAF began flying air strikes to destroy the equipment left behind. If Phu had waited two more days for the engineers to finish their work at Cheo Reo, then sent all the heavy equipment in one stroke, he could possibly have fooled the North Vietnamese but by creating a chokepoint in the narrow valley of Cheo Reo, he was bound to attract their attention.

In fact, North Vietnamese patrols began to report unusual movement as early as 15 March. The massive civilian exodus the next day signified only one thing: the ARVN was evacuating the northern Central Highlands through Route 7B. General Dung was furious that the commander of the 320th Division had not foreseen what was happening but he soon learned that the unit had positioned its 9th Battalion, 64th Regiment, near Cheo Reo, in preparation for a future attack against the town. The engineers of the unit had also opened a path west of the town. At 2230 hours, the 9th Battalion received orders to move immediately to cut Route 7B south of Cheo Reo and await there the arrival of the rest of the division. In the middle of the night, each soldier would light a 'torch' comprising either bamboo or a spare rubber sandal and run to cross the two ridgelines to reach the ambush site but they got lost and eventually reached it only by midday, ambushing and destroying a column of eight M113s. Meanwhile, they were superseded by the 2nd Battalion, 48th Regiment, using the path opened through the jungle. This unit clashed with some of the 23rd Ranger outposts in the Chu Pa pass, 4km west of Cheo Reo, at dawn. Subsequently, the entire PAVN 320 Infantry Division was sent to

The ARVN's 'family syndrome' was repeated again along Route 7B. With their families living beside their bases, the troops were too preoccupied with saving their loved ones to adhere to the shaky withdrawal directives. This anxious Ranger ponders his next move while feeding his child. (Nguyen Van Khiem Collection)

Using the path opened through the jungle, the PAVN 64th Regiment, 320th Division, was installed on ridges east of Che Reo in a bid to halt the retreating ARVN column. It was supported by 85mm field guns as well as 37mm AA guns of the 593rd Anti-Aircraft Regiment, which poured fire on Route 7B. (PAVN)

The VNAF abandoned 42 aircraft at Pleiku, with 32 in flyable storage, including 21 Douglas A-1 Skyraiders of the 530th Fighter Squadron. The unit had been disbanded in November 1974, and the aircraft had been mothballed and could not be evacuated. (PAVN)

destroy the South Vietnamese column along Route 7B, with the 95B Regiment, the 1st Tank Battalion of the 273rd Armoured Regiment, the 675th Artillery Regiment and the 593rd Anti-Aircraft Regiment in support. However, it took 48 hours to gather the units still around Ban Me Thuot to initiate the pursuit.

The creating of a chokepoint at Cheo Reo attracted North Vietnamese attention to the ARVN evacuation. Their 675th Artillery Regiment, with long-range D-74 122mm and M-46 130mm guns, was soon targeting the area. (PAVN)

Meanwhile, Dung ordered the 968th Division and the 95A Regiment to move against Kontum and Pleiku. On 18 March, the latter entered Pleiku practically without firing a single shot. Kontum was taken over by the 29th Regiment, 968th Division. The once strongly defended centres were in chaos, the North Vietnamese intercepting and turning back columns of civilians at the southern exit of the cities. Their quick advance prevented further destruction of military stocks and abandoned equipment, which was soon integrated into the communist stores.

By late afternoon on 17 March, the new floating bridge at Cheo Reo was finally

On 18 March, the PAVN 320th Division was converging from three directions towards Cheo Reo. Leading the way were the T-54s of the 1st Tank Battalion, 273rd Armoured Regiment. (PAVN)

Among the ARVN equipment destroyed or abandoned at Cheo Reo was this UH-1H helicopter. (PAVN)

Almost half the retreating ARVN column was destroyed at Cheo Reo. These vehicles were caught trying to bypass Route 7B along a tributary of the Ba River. They include an M548 tracked carrier, M35 trucks, bulldozers and M48 tanks. (PAVN)

operational, and the ARVN tanks surged forward to leave the congested Che Reo valley, but the trap closed slowly when the rest of the PAVN 48th Regiment reached the Chu Pa pass with some 105mm howitzers. The military had to contend with masses of civilian vehicles as the people fled in panic. Upon reaching the pass, the North Vietnamese opened fire with RPGs and recoilless rifle guns, setting fire to a dozen tanks and APCs. Colonel Dong, determined to break out at any cost, planned a new night attack with his armoured forces. He requested VNAF AC-119s to drop flares to illuminate the road. At around midnight, the leading M48s surged forward, machine guns blazing, while helicopter gunships poured fire along both sides of the road. But with practically no infantry in support and no room to manoeuvre, seven Pattons were destroyed within five minutes. While Dong tried to regroup his tanks, the civilians surged forward. To avoid running over them, he ordered the tanks to turn on their headlights. The result was predictable, with other tanks being hit, so Dong ordered a withdrawal.

By daybreak on 18 March, PAVN artillery shells began to fall on Cheo Reo, setting ablaze houses and causing havoc among the thousands of vehicles assembled there. Terrified refugees ran everywhere, with dead and wounded littering the streets. The 320th Division was now converging from three directions: the 9th Regiment from the north, the 48th Regiment from the west and the 64th Regiment blocking the Chu Pa pass, where it had positioned 23mm and 37mm AA guns to enfilade the road. A 'penetration' group was set up, comprising the 9th Battalion, the 1st Armoured Company on T-54s and the 6th Mechanized Company on K-63 APCs, to open the way for the rest of the division. Determined to break out, Dong planned a new attack, supported by air strikes. But the VNAF close air support was made more difficult due to the deployment of the adversaries in a restricted space, with poor or no radio communication with the troops on the ground. The operation started around noon, with 20 tanks advancing with the 7th Ranger Group. This time,

manoeuvring through the pass, the Rangers helped to eliminate the roadblocks and the column passed through. But when the Rangers reached the top of the pass, they were mistakenly hit by VNAF A-37Bs, suffering heavy casualties. A long, disorganised column of vehicles – civilian and military alike, driving madly three and four abreast, ramming each other and crushing those on foot – sped away. But the 64th Regiment rushed in reinforcements and again closed the gap, with AA guns firing directly into the trucks trying to force the roadblock. By 1700 hours on 18 March, with tanks leading, the PAVN 48th Regiment launched its attack against Cheo Reo, targeting the provincial headquarters and the main RF camp, while the 9th Regiment overran the defensive positions at My Thach and RF Base 443. By nightfall, the 9th Regiment occupied the Ngo Quyen barracks and the subsector communication centre. The 48th Regiment then attacked the local airfield but met strong resistance from the 23rd Ranger Group on its northern side. It needed a company of T-54s to seize the position, destroying along the way a group of M113s. Despite continuing resistance by small groups of desperate Rangers, by midnight, the North Vietnamese were in complete control of Cheo Reo.

The PAVN 320th Division captured some 76 ARVN tanks and APCs at Cheo Reo. These North Vietnamese troops inspect abandoned M48s of the ARVN 21st Tank Squadron at the entrance to the town. (PAVN)

On 18 March, the PAVN 95A Regiment entered Pleiku practically without firing a shot. Its soldiers caught these surprised civilians trying to flee the arrival of the communists. (PAVN)

Only the remnants of Dong's armour and some Rangers and support troops south of the town remained free. At the first ground attack, Phu immediately sent in helicopters to pick up Brigadier General Tat and Colonel Ly. Phu ordered Colonel Dong to stay behind and attempt to break out with his tankers, no matter the cost. An angry and bitter Dong immediately began gathering his remaining armour and whatever Rangers he could round up. Early on the morning of 19 March, he launched his final assault. His forces fought valiantly to penetrate the lines of the 64th Regiment but were repelled each time before reaching the pass. The North Vietnamese now turned captured 155mm howitzers against them. At 1300 hours, Phu ordered Dong to abandon his heavy equipment and escape on foot. Although Dong managed to get away, he was captured on 26 March and spent 12 years in a communist prison. The PAVN 320th Division claimed to have killed 755 ARVN soldiers and taken 13,570 prisoners during the three days of fighting at Cheo Reo. It retrieved 76 tanks and APCs, some of which were damaged or destroyed. It was the biggest defeat for ARVN armoured forces so far. Eight M41s were immediately put into use by the 9th Armoured Company. Some 20,000 civilians were fed and sent back to Pleiku and Kontum. Given the large number of civilians that were later reported at Cung Son, this would indicate that most of them escaped the carnage of Cheo Reo; but the bulk of II Corps' soldiers did not. Only a third of Dong's vehicles escaped to continue the ordeal along Route 7B.

Emboldened by his success, General Dung contacted Hanoi to report that he would continue the pursuit to destroy the remaining forces of II Corps and reach the coast. His statement arrived as the Politburo gathered on 19 March for an urgent meeting to reassess its strategy following the rapid recent developments, not only in the Central Highlands but also in the ARVN I Corps area. Here also, Thieu's policy of withdrawing forces into enclaves led to a quick and total disintegration of his forces, a disaster of even greater magnitude than in the Highlands. In two weeks, Hue and Da Nang fell (see *Target Saigon* Volume 3). General Giap immediately recognised that the long-sought 'strategic opportunity' was now at hand: South Vietnam must be conquered in 1975. All forces would be mobilised to achieve that goal as quickly as possible. He immediately decided to send south the 1st SAC, the elite PAVN strategic reserve, and to lift the limit on the use of tank and artillery ammunition. The CMC and Le Duan now

After the occupation of Cheo Reo, the whole PAVN 320th Division regrouped his units to continue the pursuit of the ARVN withdrawing convoy along Route 7B. Leading this column is a Chinese BJ-212 command car, followed by a Soviet ZIL-157 truck, the other trucks being East German UFA W 50s, illustrating well the diversity of the vehicles in service with the PAVN. (PAVN)

studied the best options to quickly win the war. The General Secretary again suggested that forces in the Central Highlands be redeployed to join those of the B2 Front for a direct offensive against Saigon but, Dung argued for the fourth time, that it was better to finish off the job by attacking down the coast. Once there, his divisions would roll down the coastal Route 1 towards Saigon. Le Duan and Giap concurred but requested that Dung send his 316th Division – still in Ban Me Thuot – to the B2 Front. The unit quickly departed for Tay Ninh. Dung now had a free hand to continue his offensive along Routes 21 and 7B.

The ARVN convoy was struggling onwards along Route 7B. The next town was Phu Tuc, reached by the 7th Ranger Group and the portion of Dong's armour that had escaped with them. Following them were thousands of forlorn civilians and a few small units of the 4th, 22nd and 23rd Ranger Groups who had cut through the mountains. In a surprise strike, the local 96th Viet Cong Battalion infiltrated the town and seized the district headquarters on the evening of 18 March. The guerrillas were driven out at dawn by the 7th Ranger Group. However, lacking enough materials, the engineers had not been able to reinforce the weak bridge there. The armoured units had no choice but to try to ford the river. While the water was shallow, both banks were marshy. As the first tank drove down to the water, it got stuck. Consequently, the engineers dismantled the PSP (pierced steel planking) steel plates from Cung Son airfield and laid them across the muddy ground, helped in their task by two CH-47A helicopters which ferried the plates. By 20 March, the job was completed. The convoy then pressed forward on the other side of the river, including by now six M48s, 16 M41s and 13 M113s.

Meanwhile, the 320th Division, after having reorganised its forces, left Che Reo by the morning of 20 March, heading east. With tanks in the lead, the division engaged in a series of firefights with the ARVN stragglers, first at Phu Tuc on 21 March, then at Ca Nui the next day. There, behind the minor Ca Lui River, the Rangers resisted stubbornly for a great part of the day, supported by a group of M48s, but were forced to withdraw when the Pattons ran out of ammunition and fuel. While leaving, some vehicles were again mistakenly hit by the VNAF. The A-37Bs, however, knocked out the Ia Nu bridge, slowing the PAVN's pursuing columns. Throughout the withdrawal, helicopter pilots brought in supplies and tried to pick up errant soldiers or civilians, but many of these died of their injuries or exhaustion or became lost in the jungle. The head of the withdrawing column reached Cung Son, where the engineers were still labouring to build a floating bridge over the Ba River. A new crossing site was selected some 5km west of the original destroyed bridge by lining the sandy bottom with PSP steel plates. Most of the plates were taken from the local airfield, but others were ferried in by CH-47As from Cam Ranh Bay. It took five days to build the floating bridge, which was finally completed on the morning of 23 March. As the first civilian vehicles raced madly to cross it, the bridge collapsed. Engineers who laboured to put it back into service came under enemy artillery fire when the first elements of the PAVN 320th Division reached the scene. This formation was opposed by a force of around 6,000 South Vietnamese, supported by 41 tanks and APCs on the opposite bank. The defenders requested air support, and A-37Bs repeatedly attacked the PAVN column, destroying several vehicles and tanks, at a price of two aircraft shot down. Thanks to the respite earned by their efforts, the evacuation continued throughout the night and into the next morning, despite a now faster current which halted further attempts to wade across the riverbed. By mid-morning on 24 March, the 6th Ranger Group – which fought as the rearguard and pushed back an assault led by 20 T-54s – also withdrew after more than a thousand vehicles had crossed, although a thousand more had been destroyed by PAVN artillery. Soon after, the bridge was bombed out by the VNAF. The PAVN 320th Division immediately surged forward, its engineers trying to rebuild the bridge. Meanwhile, the 8th Battalion of the 64th Regiment succeeded in wading across the river, accompanied by a dozen amphibious K-63s of the 6th Mechanized Company, and installed a new roadblock which tried to catch the tail of the column but the equivalent of a Ranger battalion supported by M113s forced its way through, leading to a unique duel between APCs, each side losing half a dozen vehicles.

What remained of the ARVN column continued to push ahead, accompanied now by 21 M41s and M113s. But when the convoy finally approached the exit branch of Route 7B, three local communist battalions from Phuc Yen Province had already raced south to block it, where it ran along the northern side of the Ba River, and Local Route 436, which followed the southern side. Although understrength, one battalion had seized an important bridge about 16km west of Thuy Hoa on Route 7B on 17 March and set up a second block closer to Cung Son. Another battalion dispersed and harassed traffic on Local Route 436. The Phu Yen RF had so far failed to clear the road. The Rangers methodically destroyed the first roadblock, but the one on Route 436 was anchored on an old South Korean outpost, with concrete bunkers. Brigadier General Cam begged one of the few II Corps units still maintaining its integrity, the elite reconnaissance teams of the ARVN Special Forces known as the Loi Ho, or 'Thunder Tigers', to help destroy the position. They proposed that their families be evacuated by helicopters, which was promptly accepted. The enemy position was

The VNAF experienced the utmost difficulty in providing air support to the withdrawing ARVN forces along Route 7B due to the complete breakdown of the command and control of the ground units. On no less than four occasions, they were attacked by mistake due to a lack of proper control of the air assets. These A-37Bs of the 524th Fighter Squadron, 92nd Wing, loaded with napalm bombs, are heading towards the mountainous route for a new support mission. (Pham Quang Khiem Collection)

These ARVN engineers are labouring to build a second floating bridge across the Ba River near Cung Son. It took five days to build the bridge, with much equipment being brought in by VNAF CH-47A helicopters. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

initially attacked by VNAF A-37Bs with napalm bombs, before being assaulted by the commandos and Rangers. The column again moved on but was soon stopped by another Communist roadblock closer to Thuy Hoa. It took a joint effort by a troop of M113s, which had already reached the city, and the other remaining armoured units of the column, attacking from the opposite direction, to overwhelm this last obstacle. On the afternoon of 25 March, the 60,000 survivors finally reached Thuy Hoa. It was estimated that barely 900 Rangers escaped, out of the 11,000 who set out. Of the remaining 20,000 other ARVN troops, only around 5,000 arrived at their destination. Meanwhile, out of over 300,000 civilians who joined the exodus, only some 35,000 reached Thuy Hoa. It is difficult to estimate the number of refugee casualties, but it is sadly sure that several thousands were killed on that mad march towards the sea.

Even then, their respite was short-lived. After rebuilding the bridge at Cung Son and clearing the mines on the last stretch of Route 7B, the PAVN 320th Division resumed its advance. After an hour-long artillery barrage, an assault against Thuy Hoa was launched against two areas of the western sector on 1 April, supported by 22 tanks. The city was defended by 11 weak and demoralised RF battalions, and the remnants of the 96th Ranger Battalion, 21st Group, along with 20 105mm howitzers and 11 M113s. After taking the Nhan Thap RF position west of the city, the advance encountered fierce resistance at the Ong Chu bridge, while the VNAF was particularly active. By midmorning, with tanks providing direct fire from the other riverbank, as well as 11 85mm field guns, the North Vietnamese stormed the bridge, opening the way for the captured M41s of the 9th Tank Company. The appearance of the M41 Walker Bulldogs confused the South Vietnamese, who initially did not react. The company's commander, Doan Sinh Huong, penetrated inside the sector headquarters, quickly destroying four 105mm howitzers, before driving towards the pier in the harbour area. A series of boats were leaving the quay, fully loaded with soldiers and refugees. He repeatedly hit the last one, eventually sinking it. By the evening, the last pockets of resistance were eliminated. Brigadier General Tran Van Cam, the II Corps Deputy CO, was arrested, the first ever South Vietnamese general to be taken prisoner. Not stopping there, the 320th Division moved south down Route 1 and occupied the Ca pass, which was defended by the depleted 34th Ranger Battalion, opening the way to Nha Trang. Thus, the ill-conceived withdrawal that the South Vietnamese press had christened 'The road of blood and tears' ended in total disaster.

Evacuation of the 22nd Division

After occupying Pleiku and Kontum, the PAVN 968th and 95A Regiment were ordered to roll down Route 19 and join the 3rd Division to destroy the ARVN 22nd Division, the only viable unit left in II Corps and now completely isolated on the coast of Binh Dinh Province, where Viet Cong guerrilla activity remained strong. General Phu decided to pull the 22nd Division back towards Nha Trang to

The second floating bridge was finally completed on the morning of 23 March. However, a mass of civilian vehicles raced madly to cross it, causing the structure to collapse. The bridge was repaired and reopened the same afternoon, permitting a more orderly crossing by the retreating column's vehicles. (US Army)

protect that city and the nearby strategic port of Cam Ranh. On 30 March, ships arrived there for a short stop with what remained of the Marine Division evacuated from Da Nang. Phu pleaded without success with the JGS to retain the Marines to fight alongside his surviving II Corps forces but the ships departed the next day. With no other choice remaining, he ordered the commander of the 22nd Division, Brigadier General Phan Dinh Niem, to pull back to the coastal town of Qui Nhon to be evacuated by sea. However, the JGS could spare no additional ships for that task, since practically all the VNN's assets were already mobilised to evacuate the forces of I Corps. Phu had to rely on the local ships of the 2nd Coastal Zone of Commodore Hoang Co Minh at Cam Ranh. The JGS could only send the destroyer *Tran Nhat Duat* (*HQ-03*) to add more firepower to its patrol ships.

Meanwhile, Niem ordered his 41st and 42nd Regiments to defend the southern exit of Route 19 in order to allow the 47th Regiment of Colonel Le Cau to pull out from northern Binh Dinh. Lacking transportation, the unit had to walk 45km to their new position, soon joined by thousands of civilians. During the last week of March, the PAVN 3rd Division sent one of its battalions to the rear of the other two regiments and seized a bridge to cut their retreat route. The divisional artillery did not arrive in time for the battalion's attack, and the 42nd Regiment drove it off, causing heavy casualties. The North Vietnamese brought in reinforcements and continued to attack for several days but with little success. Furious, the PAVN 3rd Division commander sacked his regimental artillery chief as well as the commanding officer of the transportation battalion. At the same time, three newly formed Viet Cong local force regiments attacked the RF/PF positions north of Qui Nhon. Most the ARVN Regional troops' positions were overwhelmed, allowing the North Vietnamese to cut Route 1 and block the retreat of the 47th Regiment. With the ARVN 22nd Division's rear now threatened, the PAVN trap was closing. The 968th Division reached an assembly area near Binh Khe on 27 March, and the 3rd Division reinforced its roadblock behind the 42nd Regiment. On 30 March, PAVN sappers infiltrated Qui Nhon, where all the RF forces had deserted. Local Viet Cong units also attacked the Phu Cat AB, also abandoned by its RF defenders. The VNAF security guards pushed them back, but more Viet Cong troops were converging on the gates by the evening. The base commander requested urgent help, as a result of which Colonel Le Van Thao, commander of the VNAF 92nd Air Wing at Phan Rang, took off at nightfall for Phu Cat at the head of a formation of 40 A-37Bs for a BOBS (Beacon-Only Bombing System) attack mission. Over the enemy assembling area, each aircraft dropped simultaneously six 500lb bombs, saturating the area and thwarting the assault. The respite was short, however, and the airbase was evacuated the next day.

On 31 March, General Phu ordered the 22nd Division to pull out towards Qui Nhon and secure the harbour sector there to be retrieved by sea. The first unit to disengage was the 41st Regiment of Colonel

The respite was brief for the withdrawing ARVN convoy, as PAVN artillery pounded mercilessly the new traffic jam on the western side of the river. Hundreds of vehicles were destroyed. In the foreground are two V100 armoured cars. The military trucks were mostly of the M35 and M54 types. (PAVN)

After three days of fighting, the PAVN 320th Division took the crossing at Cung Son, again capturing a huge haul of equipment, including this M42 of the ARVN 4th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion. However, the division was temporarily forced to stop its pursuit when the floating bridge was destroyed by the VNAF. (PAVN)

Despite the destruction of the second floating bridge, the PAVN 320th Division dispatched across the Ba River the 8th Battalion of the 64th Regiment, which succeeded in wading across the river, accompanied by a dozen amphibious K-63s of the 6th Mechanized Company. (PAVN)

Nguyen Thieu, to link up with the 42nd Regiment. The unit forced the roadblock at Phu An, but at the end of the afternoon, when it was nearing the 42nd Regiment's position, the way was again blocked by units of the PAVN 3rd Division. In the meantime, its rearguard was attacked by the PAVN 968th Division. Under heavy enemy artillery shelling, the 41st Regiment advanced methodically with its attached 14th ACS, overwhelming each enemy position, expanding outward to cover both sides of the road. Despite heavy losses, by nightfall the unit had passed through and continued eastwards on Route 19. Meanwhile, the 47th Regiment had been stopped at a new roadblock on Route 1 but punched through it after suffering heavy casualties. Many accompanying civilians were also killed. The unit was then attacked a second time. After being pinned in place, Colonel Le Cau

On 25 March, some 60,000 survivors finally reached Thuy Hoa, punching through the roadblock of the PAVN 64th Regiment. This led to a unique duel between the opposing M113 and K-63 APCs. (US Army)

The first Rangers, with their families, finally get to Thuy Hoa. However, barely 900 Rangers escaped, out of some 11,000 who originally embarked on the retreat. (ARVN)

ordered his men to break up into small teams and to reach Qui Nhon at any cost.

The Communist local force regiment was already closing on Qui Nhon, entering the city from the north and brushing aside the RF troops holding the outskirts. By 1830 hours, it had captured the provincial headquarters and the city centre. Throughout the day, the 22nd Division commander had been flying back and forth in his helicopter, dodging flak, trying to help his troops. But now, with his 47th Regiment decimated, the 41st and 42nd Regiments still struggling along Route 19 – caught between two enemy divisions

It took the PAVN 320th Division a week to regroup and resupply its units, then cross the repaired second floating bridge at Cung Son and continue its advance down Route 7B. It took many efforts for the North Vietnamese engineers to clear the heavily mined last stretch of the road. They used specialised equipment for this task, including North Korean BTR-40 armoured cars equipped to generate magnetic fields to detonate the mines. (PAVN)

The PAVN 320th Division attack against Thuy Hoa was launched on 1 April, supported by 22 T-54 and eight captured M41 tanks, on the western sector. (PAVN)

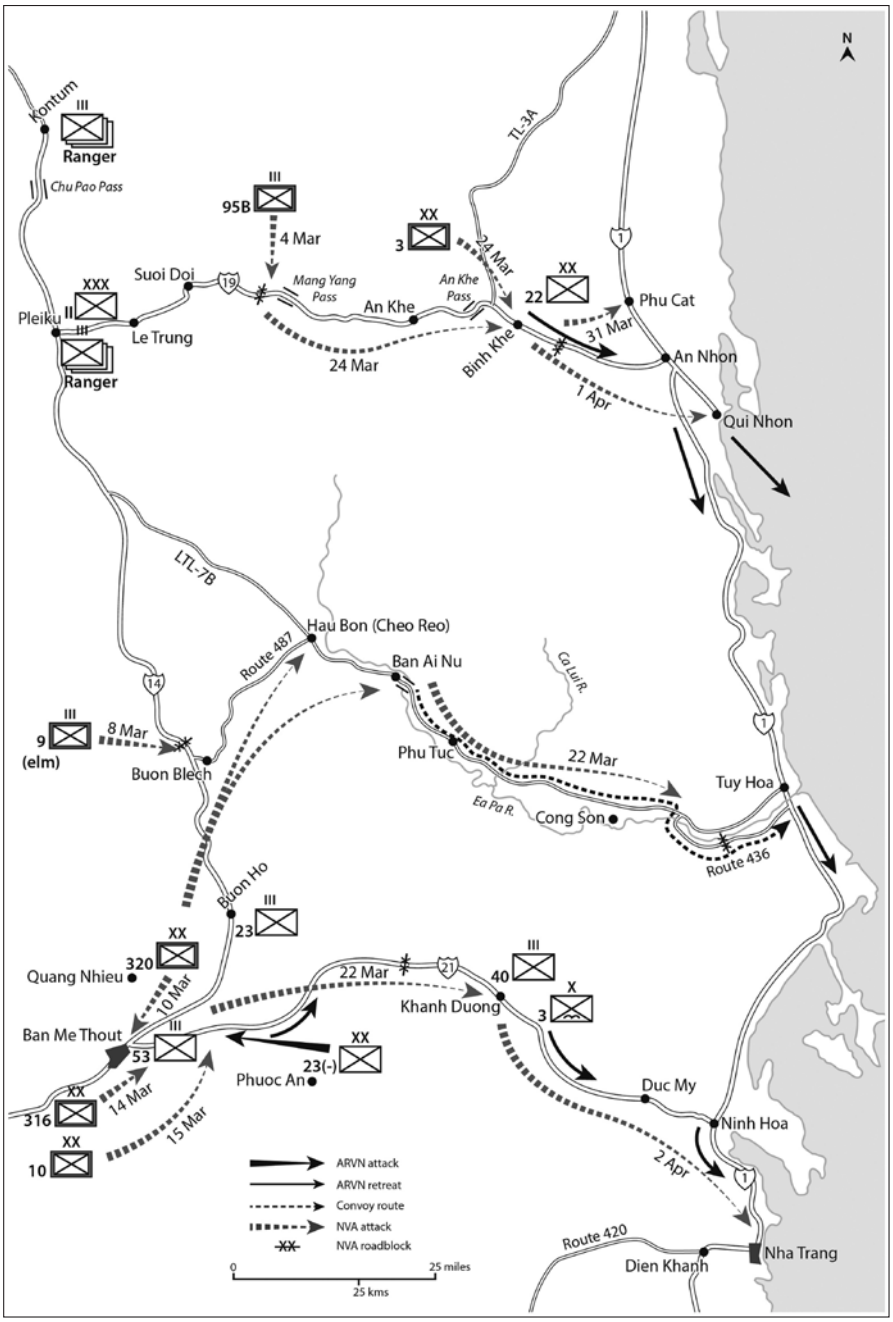
The thin RF defences on the western sector of Thuy Hoa were quickly pushed aside by the North Vietnamese tanks. The T-54s moved on quickly, destroying any encountered ARVN vehicles. (PAVN)

On 2 April, while the T-54s had broken into the city, these civilians tried desperately to board a departing VNAF CH-47A helicopter at the local Thuy Hoa airfield. (US Army)

The North Vietnamese T-54s entered Thuy Hoa military harbour. Taking position on the pier, they opened fire on the departing ships loaded with ARVN troops and refugees. (PAVN)

– and Qui Nhon itself already fallen, it was too much for Brigadier General Niem. Early in the evening, mentally and physically exhausted, he collapsed and was taken aboard a VNN ship to rest. Facing an imminent disaster, President Thieu allowed the ships still picking up refugees off the coast of Da Nang to sail to Qui Nhon. Thieu also agreed that Commodore Minh be nominated as the provisional commander of the 22nd Division to supervise the extraction of the unit. The VNN commander, Admiral Chung Tan Cang, reasoned that the combined naval groups and their superior communications would give Commodore Minh the necessary means to establish a defensive perimeter. The flotilla arrived to rescue the division at 2100 hours and Minh came ashore on a beach nearby to contact the first elements of the 22nd Division that had arrived. The retrieval would be made by five LCMs (landing craft mechanized), each able to carry 500 men. They would ferry the troops out to the requisitioned freighters and the warships. After travelling on Route 19 all night, the 41st and 42nd Regiments reached the outskirts of Qui Nhon on the morning of 1 April. They were ordered to make for the beach. It was decided to have the 42nd Regiment and the M41s and M113s lead the way, followed by the artillery, with the 41st Regiment acting as the rearguard. Three additional enemy roadblocks were punched through with the help of 105mm howitzers and the M41s and M113s. Reaching the beach, they redeployed to create a defensive perimeter and, in orderly fashion, began to board the ships. Throughout the day, the LCMs ferried out the troops under the cover of artillery fire from the howitzers and warships. Meanwhile, exhausted elements of the 47th Regiment also reached the landing points. However, most of the unit had been dispersed and destroyed during its retreat. Its commander, Colonel Le Cau, then stepped on a land mine and was badly injured. He told his men to leave him and save themselves. They refused and tried to carry him but were soon surrounded and taken prisoner. At the beach, after supervising the boarding of his last men, the commander of the 42nd Regiment, Colonel Nguyen Huu Thong, waved them goodbye, went to a nearby house and committed suicide. By 1900 hours, the beachhead was being increasingly targeted by enemy artillery. At around 2100 hours, the LSM *Ninh Giang* (*HQ-403*) tried to reach the beach but was hit by RPG rockets and forced to retreat. Not wanting to risk the loss of his precious LSMs, Commodore Minh ordered they be replaced by the smaller gunboats.

At dawn on 2 April, with the North Vietnamese firing at any approaching craft, the word was passed to the remaining ARVN elements to swim out to the ships. The operation lasted until 1100 hours. When it was completed, some 7,000 troops had been saved, but all the heavy equipment had been abandoned and sabotaged. Only the 41st Regiment CO, Colonel Nguyen Thieu, was rescued with his



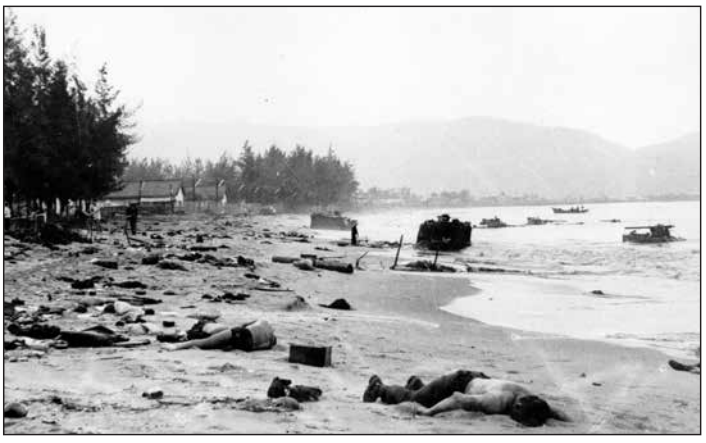
The North Vietnamese advance into theARVN MR II in March and April 1975. (Map by George Anderson)

troops. Instead of being disembarked at Nha Trang, where the situation had also unravelled, they were brought back to Vung Tau near Saigon. Colonel Thieu helped form the remaining men of what was once the proud 22nd Division into two regiments. The evacuation of the unit was an amazing feat of arms. It maintained unit integrity through 25 days of intense combat and inflicted heavy casualties on the North Vietnamese. Led by dedicated officers, the troops, although outflanked and outgunned, smashed through a series of enemy roadblocks, did not panic or desert, and were eventually evacuated.

The End of II Corps

While the ARVN positions were crumbling in II Corps' northern sector, a last drama took place in the Central Highlands southern sector with the survivors of the 24th Ranger Group, which had been mostly destroyed at Kien Duc prior to the attack against Ban Me Thuot. Led by the CO of the 82nd Battalion, Major Vuong Mong Long, they were ordered to march southeast through the jungle to Lam Dong Province to reach the nearest friendly unit at Bao Loc. It was a long walk, without any resupply available as all the VNAF helicopters had been mobilised for the battles along Routes 7B and 21. The Rangers survived by raiding enemy depots and attacking their supply convoys. Meanwhile, the PAVN 7th Division of the B2 Front, supported by tanks, attacked Lam Dong Province, and by 31 March had occupied Di Linh and Bao Loc. Here, RF survivors were escaping towards Dalat, capital of Tuyen Duc Province, the only one still in ARVN control in the Highlands. However, surrounded, and defended only by Regional forces, it was decided to evacuate the Military Academy. The departure of the cadets on the night of 31 March led to a mass exodus of civilians down Route 11 towards Phan Rang. The RF units that remained crumbled, and when the PAVN 812th Regiment moved in on 3 April, it encountered only sporadic resistance. However, the retreating Rangers knew nothing of these events. After more than two weeks in the jungle, evading their North Vietnamese pursuers, they found that Bao Loc and then

The ships of the VNN 2nd Coastal Zone, in addition to some of the Sea Fleet, were mobilised to evacuate the ARVN 22nd Division from Qui Nhon. As the town had already fallen into enemy hands, the main evacuation point was redirected towards a nearby beach on 1 April. The warships provided covering fire as the troops were evacuated. (VNN)



The last elements of the ARVN 22nd Division had to swim out to the ships when North Vietnamese forces closed in on 2 April. Unfortunately, many did not make it and were killed on the beach. (PAVN)

During the evacuation of the ARVN 22nd Division, all its heavy equipment had to be abandoned, including these M41s and M113s of the 14th ACS. (PAVN)

Dalat had already fallen to the enemy. Finally spotted by VNAF reconnaissance, they were evacuated by helicopters during the next two days.

Meanwhile, the concluding operation in the conquest of the Central Highlands was being played out on Route 21. On 19 March, the PAVN 10th Division arrived at the outskirts of Khanh Duong. The town lies in a flat valley surrounded by high mountains, the last blocking position before the critical M'Drak pass, which was the gateway to the coast and Nha Trang. It was defended by two battalions of the ARVN 40th Regiment, 22nd Division, which had just arrived from Binh Dinh Province, and four RF battalions, supported by 105mm artillery. But the morale of the RF was at rock bottom with its recent defeats and withdrawals. Bolstering them was the 3rd Airborne Brigade, a 3,800-strong elite force, just pulled out from the I Corps area and positioned in the M'Drak pass. The 3rd Airborne had disembarked from VNN ships at Cam Ranh Bay and been trucked there on 20 March. The unit had the impossible task of defending a nearly 20km-long stretch of tortuous mountain routes. The brigade commander, Lieutenant Colonel Le Van Phat, positioned his battalions on a series of crests with artillery, in order to provide supporting fire for each other. This section of ARVN-controlled Route 21 from Khanh Duong to M'Drak pass was supported by 26 105mm and six 155mm howitzers. Part of the 2nd ACS, with six M41s and 14 M113s, was available as a counterattack force. The VNAF was also tasked to provide 80 attack sorties per day to support the paratroopers.

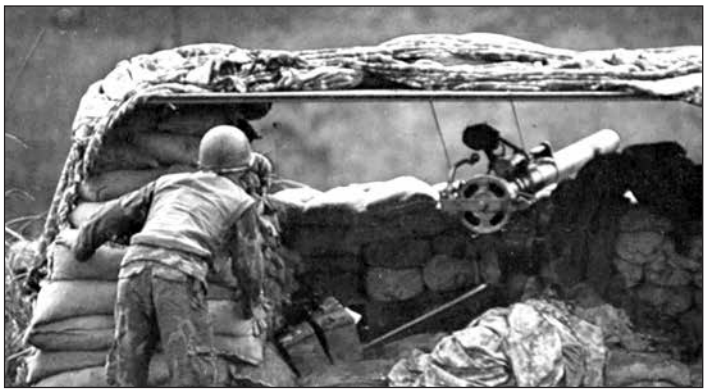
General Dung ordered the PAVN 10th Division, reinforced by the independent 25th Regiment, to allow no respite for the enemy and be prepared to punch through the pass. It was supported by the 2nd Armoured Battalion and the 40th Independent Artillery Regiment (with 130mm guns and captured 155mm howitzers), with the 3rd Armoured Battalion and the attached SU-100 company as a second echelon. The PAVN 66th Regiment had the responsibility to open the route, with a battalion-sized task force made up of seven T-54s and six K-63s, plus 85mm field guns, as a vanguard. The attack against Khanh Duong started on 21 March along Route 21 and on the north-western sector of the town. The ARVN 40th Regiment drove off the initial assault after VNAF A-37Bs knocked out several armoured elements. The assault resumed the next day at dawn. The group advancing along Route 21 was halted when the South Vietnamese blew up a bridge

Pressed by the PAVN 3rd and 968th Divisions, as well as the 95A Regiment, the ARVN 22nd Division found itself completely isolated in the northern coastal area of II Corps. It was then ordered, on 31 March, to retreat towards the port of Qui Nhon, with the M41s of the 14th ACS leading. (ARVN)

After the fall of Ban Me Thuot, it was hoped to block the North Vietnamese advance down the coast through the M'Drak pass. It was decided, on 20 March, to deploy there the ARVN 3rd Airborne Brigade, just pulled out from I Corps. Disembarked from ships at Cam Ranh Bay, they were trucked towards Route 21. (ARVN)

The paratroopers were thinly spread on a series of hilltops to defend a nearly 20km-long mountain route. They were aided by a series of fire support bases equipped with artillery, like this battery of 155mm howitzers. (ARVN)

Instead of frontally attacking the airborne positions, the PAVN 10th Division infiltrated its units around the enemy troops and encircled them. (PAVN)



Outgunned and outnumbered, the ARVN 3rd Airborne Brigade fought tenaciously for 12 days at the M'Drak pass. However, isolated on their hilltops, like this one equipped with an M40 106mm recoilless rifle, they were overwhelmed one by one or forced to withdraw. (ARVN)

North Vietnamese troops of the PAVN 3rd Division fight to eliminate the last pockets of resistance inside Qui Nhon. They are manning a B-10 82mm recoilless gun. (PAVN)

These soldiers of the PAVN 3rd Division are using a captured M60 LMG during the fighting inside Qui Nhon on 1 April. (PAVN)

there. Another attack pressed on against the north-west sector, where several tanks were destroyed by the VNAF. The North Vietnamese took a pause, resuming the attack after a two-hour artillery barrage. The RF defences then crumbled, leading to the rest of the PAVN 10th Division surging forward and reached the city centre. At noon, Gen Phu ordered the outnumbered 40th Regiment to retreat.

After repairing the bridge, the 10th Division moved immediately towards the M'Drak pass, hoping to catch the Red Berets off guard. But from his vantage point, Lieutenant Colonel Phat spotted the communist column coming and called in artillery when it reached

The 3rd Airborne Brigade was forced to withdraw from the M'Drak pass on 1 April. Some battalions were picked up en route by VNAF helicopters and flown to Phan Rang. The enemy sometimes attacked the pick-up zones, forcing a hasty evacuation, with some troops hanging on the landing skids as the Hueys departed under North Vietnamese artillery fire. (US Army)

On 2 April, the PAVN 10th Division resumed its advance down Route 21. These tankers of the 2nd Armoured Battalion rejoiced to have taken the Ranger Duc My training centre with little opposition. (PAVN)

a flat area right before the pass. Several vehicles were hit and burst into flames, and the column retreated. Phat then ordered that when the last escaping ARVN troops had passed through, the half a dozen bridges west of the pass were to be blown up. However, Phat's belief that destroying the bridges would impede the PAVN's advance did not account for the superbly efficient North Vietnamese engineers. In less than six days, they not only rebuilt them but also widened lateral footpaths and tracks used by wood-cutters' trucks despite ARVN artillery harassment fire and VNAF air strikes. Given the rugged terrain, the CO of the 10th Division, Senior Colonel Ho De, chose to outflank the Red Berets, sending his 24th Regiment looping to block the eastern side of the pass. There it entrenched and destroyed an ARVN resupply convoy on 28 March, sealing the battlefield. Phat immediately reacted by sending his 2nd Battalion to clear out the roadblock, while the 5th Battalion continued to guard the pass's western entrance. The 6th Battalion, meanwhile, held the middle near the village of Phuong Hoang.

At 0300 hours on 29 March, the PAVN 10th Division launched a massive artillery barrage. For almost six hours, the Airborne batteries exchanged fire with communist artillery. At 0930 hours, the PAVN simultaneously struck each Airborne battalion with a regiment. The

Using woodcutters' paths and new roads opened by their bulldozers, the North Vietnamese had been able to outflank the paratroopers' positions. They thereby provided direct fire support for the assaulting infantry. (PAVN)

As soon as the PAVN 10th Division reached Ninh Hoa on 2 April, the meagre and disorganised ARVN forces protecting Nha Trang began to crumble. A new mass exodus began, with scores of military and civilian vehicles fleeing south down Route 1. (US Army)

By the evening of 2 April, the PAVN 10th Division entered Nha Trang practically without a fight. Leading the way was this T-54 of the 2nd Armoured Battalion, followed by a captured M42 anti-aircraft tank. (PAVN)

T-34/85 and T-54 tanks and 37mm anti-aircraft guns manoeuvred to encircle the enemy positions, providing direct fire support to the attackers. Fighting raged all day, but the 5th and 6th Battalions, backed by numerous air strikes, held their ground. However, at the eastern entrance of the pass, the 2nd Battalion suffered heavy losses. The attached M41s destroyed three T-54s, but at a cost of three of their own tanks. In the afternoon, the waves of North Vietnamese infantry began to infiltrate between the hills, where the three companies of the battalion were entrenched. By nightfall, the brigade CO requested additional reinforcements or permission to withdraw. The North Vietnamese intercepted the transmission and, believing that Phat had decided upon a withdrawal, they launched an all-out assault on the morning of 31 March. One regiment with tanks assaulted the 5th Airborne Battalion at the western end of the pass. A second regiment

On 3 April, despite persistent VNAF air strikes and pockets of resistance, the PAVN 10th Division entered Cam Ranh and occupied its huge military port, probably one of the best in Southeast Asia, which had been developed at great expense by the Americans. (PAVN)

attacked the 6th Battalion from the north, while the 24th Regiment moved down from the hills and again cut all escape from Route 21. Further along the road, the 72nd Ranger Battalion of 21st Group, re-forming at the Ranger Duc My training camp after its retreat from Ban Me Thuot, tried to break through and assist the Red Berets. The 10th Division shifted the regiment attacking the 6th Battalion and tanks to reinforce the 24th Regiment. Despite flight after flights of A-37Bs dropping bombs and napalm on the 24th Regiment, destroying four T-54s, the Rangers failed to punch through, sustaining heavy casualties. The 3rd Airborne Brigade was now effectively encircled. Throughout the night, dispersed paratrooper companies on their hilltops fought desperate battles. At daybreak on 1 April, the 10th Division launched its final assault in a superbly coordinated operation between infantry, tanks and artillery. In less than an hour, the last Airborne positions were overrun. The survivors were ordered to break out into the jungle and some were rescued by VNAF helicopters in the following days. The PAVN 10th Division continued its relentless advance. Its 24th and 28th Regiments, with tanks and 85mm field guns, rolled down Route 21, occupying the Ranger Duc My training centre at nightfall.

In Nha Trang, disorder was growing with the massive arrival of refugees and deserters from the Central Highlands, but also from I Corps when the ships that escaped the area docked at the city or at Cam Ranh. General Phu declared martial law, with the death penalty for any deserters caught pillaging. Upon learning of the destruction of the 3rd Airborne Brigade, Phu hurriedly convened a meeting to organise the defence of the city and the siege of the reallocated II Corps headquarters. He had few forces left; just some Rangers and the survivors of the 23rd Division that were being retrained north of the city. The rest were local RF units. He nominated Lieutenant General Pham Quoc Thuan, Director of the Dong De NCO School, as commander of the 'Nha Trang Front'. An officer then ran in to report that reconnaissance aircraft had spotted PAVN tanks at Duc My and also around Ninh Hoa. In fact, the North Vietnamese tankers had not yet reached Ninh Hoa, which was close to Nha Trang. Phu immediately boarded his helicopter to assess the situation for himself. Throughout the day, he tried incessantly to rally his troops, either from his UH-1H or C-47. However, his departure provoked a panic at his headquarters; the remaining staff officers fled, causing a chain reaction in the combat units. Unable to contact the II Corps headquarters for instructions, what remained of the 23rd Division pulled out, followed by the two battalions of the 40th Regiment, evacuated from Khanh Duong. The US Consulate was also evacuated precipitously. Rumours spread that Phu had fled towards Saigon, abandoning the city. People panicked and hurriedly tried to embark on any ships in the harbour. Among them were the Pioneer Command ship *Sgt Andrew Miller*, and *Greenville Victory* of the US Navy Military Sealift Command, engaged in the evacuation of refugees from Da Nang. Those who fell were trampled to death, while others were drowned trying to fight their way on board. Others climbed on any vehicles available for a mad dash south along Route 1. The city was plunged into chaos, with plundering and other crimes committed by unruly deserters.

Returning to Nha Trang in the evening, General Phu was met by VNAF Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Oanh, Director of the Air Training Centre, who told Phu that the JGS had appointed him as the new battlefield commander. The next day, Phu was informed that II Corps had been dissolved and that the remaining coastal Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan Provinces would be incorporated into III Corps' area. Phu was relieved of his command and later put under house arrest at the JGS compound in Saigon with a handful of other ARVN senior officers who were deemed to have failed. He committed suicide when the North Vietnamese entered Saigon on 30 April.

On 2 April, the PAVN 10th Division resumed its advance down Route 21, its columns being attacked several times by VNAF A-37Bs, but it had reached Ninh Hoa by noon. Although it had to fight its way through some rearguard Ranger elements on Route 1, by 1700 hours the division was advancing into Nha Trang. The next day,

despite persistent VNAF air strikes and pockets of resistance, the 10th continued its advance down Route 1 and entered Cam Ranh by midday, occupying its huge military port.

Meanwhile, on 27 March, the Politburo and the CMC had decided to reorganise part of the PAVN's Central Highlands units into the 3rd SAC. This now comprised the 10th, 316th and 320th Divisions, the 198th Sapper Regiment, the 273rd Armoured Regiment, the 675th Artillery Regiment, the 312th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment, the 545th Engineer Regiment and the 29th Signal Regiment. Major General Vu Lang was appointed Corps Commander. He took a week to reassemble his units, replenishing and training them on captured enemy equipment. Then they wheeled back, heading down Route 14 towards the B2 Front with Saigon as its target.

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